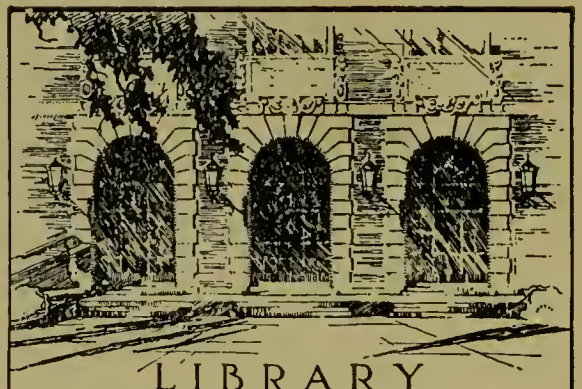

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Constance Everett Green

With the Author's love.

April. 1954.

TORWOOD'S TRUST.

A Novel.

BY

EVELYN EVERETT-GREEN.

'Out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety . . . I protest, our plot is as good a plot as ever was laid.'

HENRY IV., *Pt. I., Act II., Sc. III.*

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

LONDON:
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,
Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen.
1884.

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TO MY SISTERS,

GERTRUDE AND CONSTANCE,

THIS, MY FIRST NOVEL,

Is Dedicated,

IN FULFILMENT OF A PROMISE MADE TO THEM,

IN THE DAYS OF OUR EARLY CHILDHOOD.

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TORWOOD'S TRUST.

CHAPTER I.

A PROLOGUE.

PHILIP DEBENHAM, at the advanced age of eighteen years, was, to use his own words, 'a desperate man.' The cause of his desperation was a piece of information he had just received in a letter, which lay open before him, and which was signed 'Your affectionate uncle, Alfred Belassis. The piece of intelligence was this, that his affectionate uncle had secured for his young nephew a clerkship in a City merchant's counting-house, and that he was to repair thither on the following day to commence his uncongenial labours. In consequence of this arrangement, the affectionate uncle went on to explain,

it would be impossible for the lad to pay the visit to the West-country home to which he had so long looked forward. 'Indeed, we have all been anticipating with pleasure this visit,' said the letter; 'for eight years of continental school-life must have taught you much, and would doubtless render you a delightful companion for your cousins, to say nothing of dear Maud, who is spending her holidays here, and is greatly disappointed, as we all are, at this unforeseen turn affairs have taken. But business, my dear boy, must come before pleasure; and your sound common-sense will tell you that this opportunity is not one to be lost.'

'The old hypocrite! The old scoundrel!' muttered Phil savagely. 'As though he didn't know he had always promised not to set me down to a desk at all; but to let me have an art education, or at least to teach me farming, and let me lead an outdoor life. I can't stand a counting-house. I'd sooner run away to sea at once, only I'm rather too old to play that game. That Belassis is the biggest scoundrel that ever walked the earth! Does he think I don't know how he ruined my father, and drove him into his grave? And

now he wants to drive me to desperation and despair too!'

Phil pushed back his chair, and paced the narrow, dingy room angrily, looking and feeling not at all unlike a caged wild beast.

Then he took up and opened another letter, which lay upon the darned white table-cloth. His breakfast was growing cold; but Phil was too much excited to think of food. This second letter was in a sprawling, schoolgirl hand, and ran as follows:

'DEAREST OLD PHIL,

'It is a shame! How I do hate Uncle Belassis; and Aunt Celia is just as bad!—so horrid and cold, she makes me think of a snake! I hate being here! I'd rather spend my holidays at school, as I generally do; only poor Aunt Olive likes me to be here. They are so horrid to her. We did so look forward to your coming—it is a shame! Do you know why Uncle Belassis is determined to keep you away? It's because he's afraid old great-uncle Maynard may leave you his money, and he wants Lewis to get it, and so he won't let you come here at all; and he doesn't let me come

often. I can't bear Lewis. He is a horrid lout of a boy, who pretends to be grown up, and says stupid things to me. I box his ears when he does; and then Aunt Celia says, in her cold, horrid way, that I don't know what I am doing. I'm sure I don't care if I don't. She told me the other day that Uncle Belassis will be my guardian till I'm twenty-four; that papa said in his will that I wasn't to be of age, or to have any money, till then. I know Uncle Belassis made him do that—Aunt Olive is sure of it; and she says she isn't sure that I shall get my money properly then; but I don't understand, and I don't care, except to get free from Uncle Belassis. I should like to be able to take Aunt Olive away, and live with her somewhere, and never see any of these people any more. It is a shame you're not coming back, Phil. I haven't seen you for eight years; and I can't even remember you properly, for I was only six. If we didn't write to one another, it would be as bad as having no brother at all. How horrid Uncle Belassis is to us both!

'Your loving sister,

'MAUD.'

This rambling epistle only added fuel to the fire of Phil's wrath.

'So that's it, is it? That's why I've been kept abroad, and never been allowed to see a single one of my own relations all these years; —lest the old miser Maynard should make me his heir, and spoil my cousin Lewis's chance! Oh, Uncle Belassis—Uncle Belassis! I'm only eighteen—I haven't a penny of my own—I'm a minor, and your ward, and miserably powerless; but if my turn should ever come, won't I make you smart!'

Whilst Phil continues his impotent ravings and his wild-beast walk in his dreary London lodgings (of Uncle Belassis' choosing), the reader must submit to the infliction of a brief summary of Phil's family history.

His grandfather, Mr. Charles Maynard, was the younger of two brothers, both men of considerable wealth, who owned adjoining properties in one of the western counties. Mr. Maynard, the elder brother, a confirmed bachelor, and a man of eccentric, misanthropic nature, was yet living and in good health, in spite of his seventy-four years, although his brother had died many years before.

Mr. Charles Maynard married young, and had three daughters, but no son. The eldest, Maud, married Mr. Debenham, a man of some means and of good family. He had cultivated literary tastes, but no business faculties, and was only too glad to entrust his affairs to the capable hands of his wife's sister's husband, Alfred Belassis. Celia, Charles Maynard's second and favourite daughter, had married the son of the family lawyer, and did very well for herself, for at his father's death Alfred Belassis became a wealthy man, and retired from active business, though he was always ready to 'do a good turn' for any of his relations, by advice or by transacting business for them.

Olive, the third daughter, 'did for herself' by marrying, against her father's consent, a young clergyman, and she was accordingly cut off with a shilling, whilst Mr. Charles Maynard's property was divided between his two elder daughters, Maud having the most money, whilst to Celia was left the landed property, including a fine house and grounds, a home farm and several outlying farm-steads. This arrangement of the testator's property was

always believed to be due to the manœuvring of Alfred Belassis.

When Mrs. Debenham died, her fortune was left unreservedly to her husband; and his will left all his own property (then supposed to be considerable) to his son Philip, whilst his wife's money was left to his daughter Maud, who was to remain a minor, and Alfred Belassis' ward, until she was twenty-four years of age, after which time she would inherit this fortune—but only upon the condition that she married her cousin Lewis Belassis, Alfred Belassis' eldest son. If she declined to marry the said Lewis, one third of the money would be hers, and two thirds would pass to Lewis. If he declined to marry her, she would have two thirds, and he one.

What had induced Mr. Debenham to insert in his will this extraordinary clause was a matter of profound perplexity to all who heard it. The only solution of the mystery lay in the fact that Alfred Belassis exercised a very peculiar influence over his brother-in-law, and had in all probability induced him by threat or entreaty to couple his bequest with this condition.

Mr. Debenham died insolvent, as appeared when his affairs came to be looked into. How or why his money had vanished none could tell. Phil was thus left totally unprovided for; but Mr. Belassis, with great show of liberality, took upon himself the care of his nephew and ward, and sent him abroad to be educated, and abroad he had remained ever since.

This was not the only generous act of Mr. Belassis; for the disinherited Olive (soon left a widow, childless, and almost penniless), who had lived since her husband's death with Mr. Debenham, managing his house after his wife's death, and taking care of his children, was by his death left once more to poverty and homelessness; but Mr. Belassis had opened his own doors to her, and she lived under his roof in a state of passive, uncomplaining servitude.

Meantime old Mr. Maynard still lived on, and his wealth, gradually accumulating, must have grown to something very considerable. The old man held aloof from all his kindred and shut himself up resolutely alone, only seeing his relatives from time to time, and

never giving anyone the smallest reason to suppose that he looked upon him or her with the least favour. But as Alfred Belassis said to himself, he must leave his money to somebody, and certainly he would not bequeath it to any charity.

He gave a home to Olive, lest her uncle's compassion should be aroused on her behalf. He banished Phil utterly, that his existence might if possible be forgotten; for the old man had been more friendly with Mr. Debenham than with Mr. Belassis, and Maud had been his eldest niece.

The little Maud was kept as far as possible in the background, and the one great hope of Alfred Belassis' heart was that his wife Celia or his son Lewis should come in for the large fortune the old man must shortly leave behind him. He surely could not have the conscience to live many years longer. It seemed almost an insult to Providence to outlast the threescore years and ten allotted as the span of man's life.

Most of this family intrigue Phil suspected; but it was little that he actually knew, for Maud was only just emerging from childhood,

and Aunt Olive's letters were but few and far between. As for Uncle Belassis, Phil disbelieved on principle every word he wrote. He had not seen him since he was ten years old, when he had told him to his face that he was an 'old villain,' and had received a sound box on the ear. However, Phil was obstinate enough to stick to his opinion, and had never seen any cause to change it.

He was eighteen now, a tall, good-looking youth enough, made more manly and self-possessed by the sort of life he had led, than those who had known him as a boy would have imagined; yet withal of a gentle, winning disposition which might, under other training, have grown weak and vacillating.

It had been his own wish to come to England at last, and learn to be independent of his uncle. He had decided talent both in art and music, which had been strengthened and cultivated by his foreign masters, and would doubtless, after some further study, enable him to make his way in the world. He had a keen love of outdoor life, too, and had been always used to much physical exercise. He was dismayed and disgusted

with the smoke and dirt of London, and longed to leave it as early as possible. His uncle was to consider what was to be done, and let him know, that he might make some arrangements before he set out for his promised visit to his relatives.

The letter containing his fate had now come, and doomed him to a City clerkship. Phil was thus driven to desperation.

There was a third letter still lying unopened, and at last that too claimed attention. It was written in a clear, bold hand, and dated from an hotel in Kensington.

'Dear Phil,

'I suppose by this time we have each learned our respective fate. My summons to England has been to hear profitable tidings. I trust you may have heard as good. Come to me here as early as you can, to talk things over.

'Yours truly,

'Torrington Torwood.'

Torrington Torwood, otherwise Tor, was the one friend Phil had made during his boyhood's years. Both English lads at foreign

schools, they had drawn very closely one to the other, and had contrived to be almost constantly together for several years past. Tor was singularly alone in the world, his only relation being a grandfather, who kept him liberally supplied with pocket-money, but never expressed the least wish to see him. Phil, too, was very much alone, despite his family connections, and the two lads had formed a very sincere friendship.

Phil, who clung to Tor, as the weaker nature must always cling to the stronger, and desired nothing better than to pour out his woes and his wrath into sympathetic ears, hurried away and quickly found himself in a comfortable private room, where Tor was sitting amid papers and parchments.

Phil lost no time in recounting his misfortunes, and Tor listened, and read the letters, and heard all that had occurred. He was only eighteen himself, but looked many years older, and his character was more decided and more fully developed than his age would indicate. He was a handsome youth, with a daring look in his eye, and a mouth that expressed a vast deal of determination.

'Phil,' he said quietly, at the close of his friend's story, 'we have always had a great wish to knock about the world together. My grandfather is dead. I am his heir. I shall have more than a thousand a year. I am to receive the income at once, without waiting for my majority. Will you cast in your lot with mine, Phil, and come with me? I am going to start almost at once, when I have signed the needful papers. Leave your uncle Belassis and all his crew—cut the connection and come with me. "Where one can dine, two can dine," you know. A thousand a year will keep the pair of us. An office-stool, or a life of travel and adventure —which do you choose, Phil?'

Phil's face had flushed crimson.

'Tor!' he cried, 'do you mean it really?'

'You know I mean it. I meant it as soon as ever I had the news, before I knew what a welcome you would get. I have had the plan in my head these three or four years past. Don't disappoint me, Phil; don't desert me. You know we just suit one another. You know your uncle Belassis is a scamp, and will ruin you if he can. Don't give him the chance. Give him the slip instead. Tell him

nothing, but come away with me. After you are of age you can write to your sister—or before, if you think he will not follow and claim you. I think we could be a match for him if he did,' Tor added reflectively; 'I don't think he'd come a second time. Well, Phil, will you come?'

'But, Tor—don't be offended with me—how can I ever hope to repay you for all I shall cost you?'

Tor laughed lightly.

'Don't trouble yourself over that, my dear boy. Wait till I ask for payment. Besides,' as he caught a dissatisfied look upon Phil's face, 'I have a strong presentiment that the old uncle will leave you his fortune in the end. You are his natural heir; you can pay me then.'

'You promise, if that happens, you'll take the money?'

'Oh yes; I promise.'

'Then I'll come. I'll run away. I'll vanish from the face of Uncle Belassis' earth, and go with you, Tor. Oh, Tor, it will be splendid!'

They were too young and enthusiastic to be troubled with thoughts of the future, to con-

sider the possibilities of life and the unpractical nature of such a partnership as the one just proposed. The possibility of Tor's marriage, the danger of a quarrel, the chance of accident, sickness, or death never troubled their heads. They had money ; they had health ; they had, or would obtain, freedom ; and they would see the world together. This was the sum-total of their reflections, and all they cared for was to get off as fast as possible.

Phil never returned to his dingy lodgings. He lay *perdu* for a few days, for fear of search, and then he and Tor sailed together for America.

CHAPTER II.

NEWS FROM ENGLAND.

TEN years later, upon a hot day in May, Torrington Torwood sat beside Philip Debenham's sick-bed in a large, bare room of an odd little hotel in the village of Hornberg, in the Black Forest.

Phil had had a severe sunstroke two days before, and had, the doctor thought, hurt his head in the fall that ensued. At any rate, he had remained insensible ever since, and gave no symptom of returning consciousness.

Since that memorable day ten years ago, when the two lads had sworn an eternal friendship and gone away together over the sea, they had never been separated for any but the briefest periods, and their romantic youthful friendship had ripened into something worthy the sacred name.

Tor was the leading spirit, and Phil's 'guide, philosopher, and friend.' Tor planned and thought; Tor plunged them into strange adventures and difficulties, and piloted them manfully out again. Tor was Phil's hero and referee, and unconsciously he grew to lean on him, to imitate him, and to become, in fact, his very shadow.

As lads, the two friends had been thought to resemble one another in disposition; but as their characters developed they grew widely dissimilar.

Phil was brilliant in conversation, fascinating in manner; and gifted with an almost boyish ingenuousness, which went far to win hearts. His nature was, without being exactly indecisive, so far facile and easy-going that 'no' was a hard word to him, and many people felt that but for the moral support given by Tor's influence, he would be easily led and easily overcome by anyone with a strong will and a purpose to serve. His outward man was prepossessing. He was tall and rather slight, with dark brown hair which lay in silky waves across his brow, and well-shaped brown eyes which were particularly frank and

expressive. He had regular, clearly-cut features, a well-trimmed dark moustache, and a very engaging smile. Altogether, Phil Debenham was considered in society a very charming man; and very much did some people wonder how it was he seemed to prefer the society of his friend Torrington Torwood to any other.

Tor was cast in a manlier mould than Phil. He stood six-feet-two in his stockings, was broad in proportion, and was gifted with physical strength to correspond. His thick curly hair and long moustache were of a tawny gold; his face was deeply bronzed by exposure to the weather, and, although the features were good, the face attracted more by its power and singularity of expression than by its symmetry of form. Tor's great grey eyes were the marked feature of his face. They were bright and piercing as an eagle's, and yet could soften in a manner one would hardly have looked for in a man of his calibre. They could flash, too, upon occasion; and when they did so upon an offender, he always showed a marked reluctance to encounter their glance again.

Tor was possessed of a strong nature and a

strong will, yet, like most strong men, his manner was gentle and quiet. He was not so ready of speech as was Phil, though when roused to wrath he could be eloquent enough, and showed a fine command of language. Under his outward shell of easy-going carelessness lay a reckless 'dare-devil' nature, which at times broke out so strongly as almost to surprise himself, and often quite astonished others.

At the present moment he looked quiet and gentle enough, sitting by Phil's bedside, and from time to time changing the wet cloths upon his head. He was uneasy about his friend, for unconsciousness is an unpleasant symptom; and although the German doctor declared there was no danger, that there was nothing to be alarmed about, Tor was not altogether reassured. For the physician had warned him that many weeks might possibly elapse before the balance of the patient's faculties was restored: he had had such cases under his care, he and his brother physicians; and Tor did not at all relish such a thought. It was uncanny to see Phil lying there, unable to speak, or even to

recognise him. Tor frowned, and pulled at his moustache, and swore softly to himself in German.

A knock at the door interrupted his musing-fit, and a packet of letters was handed in. They were all for Phil, and one was very large, and looked legal.

For three years after his flight Phil had held no communication with his relatives, but during the past seven, he had corresponded regularly, though not frequently, with his sister Maud; and he had written to her on their arrival at Hornberg, some eight days since.

From the number and bulk of the letters, it seemed as though some important communications had been waiting to be despatched as soon as an address was made known.

Tor looked at the envelopes, and then at Phil's prostrate figure and vacant face.

'Strikes me I must look into this business. He can't, poor old chap! I imagine I know as much of his affairs as he does himself—or more.'

So saying, Tor took up the bulky legal-looking packet and opened it without more ado.

It contained several papers. The first of these was from the lawyer employed by Phil's great-uncle, Mr. Maynard, and announced the death of that gentleman at the advanced age of eighty-four years. He had bequeathed his entire property to his great-nephew, Philip Debenham, and had appointed his lawyer and a man of whom Tor had never heard—a Mr. Meredith—as executors.

More than two months had elapsed since Mr. Maynard's death, but until the previous day they had had no means of communicating with Phil. This interval had given time for the proving of the will, and enabled his executors to make the following announcement. Phil had come into a valuable landed property, with a fine house and park, and valuable plate, pictures, and family furniture and heir-looms, and about £80,000 in money. The lawyer concluded by urging his coming at once to England, to assume the control over his fortune and estate.

Enclosed was an order upon a well-known German house for £100, and a sealed document, on the outside of which was written, in a cramped, clear hand :

'To be given to my great-nephew Philip Debenham, when the contents of my last will and testament are made known to him.—T. M. M.'

Tor was pulling mercilessly at his moustache, whilst a perplexed frown knitted his brow. After one more glance at Phil's prostrate figure, he proceeded to open this sealed missive.

It was dated three years back, and ran thus:

'To my great-nephew Philip Debenham, whom I have never seen.

'If ever you get this letter it will be at a time when you will just be gloating over the news of your accession to wealth. Gloat on—I don't wish to stop you. I merely wish to rid your mind of any foolish notion you may take that I have any affection for, or interest in you. I have not one spark of either. If you care to know why I have made you my heir, I will tell you. My chief reason is to spite that fawning scoundrel Belassis and his worthy spouse, who have been flattering me and grovelling at my feet, and longing and praying for my death these score of years past, and it will enrage him far more if I leave it to you,

than if I bequeath it to some philanthropic or public object; therefore, as you are my natural heir and Belassis' natural enemy, I leave you all I have, and trust that your right feeling and your father's wrongs will enable you to keep up the quarrel and ruin your rascally uncle.

'It is a good thing that your uncle's spite kept you away from this place. He meant to do you an ill turn, but he has done you a good one. If I had ever seen you, most probably I should hold you in profound contempt—the young men of the present day are supremely contemptible—and perhaps I should be unable to make up my mind to enrich you, even with the inducement of arousing the Belassis fury As it is, I can give my imagination play, and picture you what I choose. You cannot be quite a fool, or you would not have given Belassis the slip and bolted as you did. When I first heard of that act, I said to myself, "There is stuff in that lad. If I see and hear no more of him I will make him my heir." Belassis has taken care that I should hear and see no more of you, therefore *he* has made you my heir. Pay him the debt you owe him, lad, and *pay him in his own coin.*

'Philip Debenham, one charge I give you: take care of your sister. As girls go, she is a good girl; but what can a woman do? I have left her no fortune, because it would only add fuel to the flame of Belassis' determination to make her his son's wife. I trust to you to stop that marriage, and to make over to her the fortune she will thus lose. If you are a man of honour, you will do this. When Maud is twenty-four, her choice has to be made—you must be there to counsel and support her. Belassis is a crafty, determined man; and Maud is but a woman, and women will marry anything. You must never let a Debenham mate with a Belassis.

'I have no more to say. Most likely you will be too idle and too selfish to carry out a dead man's wishes. Be that as it may, my duty is to speak. You must heed or not, as you will.

'T. M. Maynard.

'Ladywell Manor,
March 3rd, 1872.'

'A charming old man,' was Tor's comment as he laid down the letter. Then he glanced at Phil once more, and fell into deep thought.

'What a confounded piece of ill-luck that

sunstroke was! What in the world is to happen I don't see yet. He may be weeks or months recovering, and who will meantime manage his affairs? Will it be the executors? —or will it be that worthy Belassis? I don't know the law, so I can't say. Here are two more letters still unopened. Will they throw any light on the situation? That is from Maud, by the writing; this, if I rightly conjecture, from Uncle Belassis. Let us see what he has to say for himself.'

Tor opened the letter and read:

'My dear Philip,

'Now that we are at last furnished with your address, I hasten to be amongst the first to offer my very warm and sincere congratulations to you upon your accession to this very handsome property; and to assure you that, in spite of my silence during these years of your wanderings in foreign lands, I have taken a very warm, almost paternal interest in your well-being, and am truly pleased that at last you will be able to return to England and settle amongst us in a position you are so well calculated to adorn.'

'The old humbug!' muttered Tor; 'the last time he saw Phil he was an urchin of ten. Much he knows what he is qualified to do. He is every bit as bad as Maud's letters have always led us to suppose. What more has he to say?'

'I do not know whether this change in your affairs may induce you to quit your wandering life and settle down; but I presume you will elect to visit your property, which in your absence I am looking after for you, to the best of my ability, and which I shall always be happy to do whenever you wish to be from home.'

'The devil you will!' muttered Tor. 'I fancy Phil will have something to say as to that. He forgets he is eight-and-twenty, and not ten. He thinks he can arrange matters just as he chooses.'

'Your executors know nothing of the management of landed property. Mr. Twyne, the lawyer, lives in a distant town, and Mr. Meredith is blind; they have, therefore, em-

powered me to superintend the business of the estate until your return, which trust I have gladly undertaken and faithfully performed, as you will be able to see for yourself upon your return. As we now own adjoining properties, our interests are all in unison.

'Pray write soon and inform us of your intentions, and meantime accept the hearty good wishes of your aunt and cousins, and believe me to remain,

'Your affectionate uncle,

'ALFRED BELASSIS.

'Thornton House, Ladywell,
May 4th, 1875.'

Tor uttered a long slow whistle indicative of a disturbed state of mind. Then he took up the remaining letter.

'Now let us see what Maud has to say.'

'MY DEAREST, DARLING OLD PHIL,

'Why *didn't* you write before? Two whole months I have been *dying* to write to you, and have had no address, and no means of finding you out. We hadn't even Tor's banker's address, and you haven't a banker,

poor dear old boy; but you have now, and any amount of money, for the will is "proved," whatever that is, and you are quite a millionnaire in the eyes of the neighbourhood. Oh, Phil, it is quite too lovely! Oh, why were you not here to witness Uncle Belassis' helpless rage and despair? He pretended not to care, but he *raged* like a wild beast to Aunt Celia in private, and I heard him. The next best thing to seeing you a rich man is to see Uncle Belassis sold. Phil, I *hate* Uncle Belassis! He is the meanest, cunningest scoundrel in the world, I think; and Aunt Celia is as bad. But, of course, it is only people like Aunt Olive and me that know this. Outsiders think, or pretend to think, him most estimable, and hold him in high repute. Even Mr. Twyne, though he doesn't like him, I think, has given him power to manage things till your return; and blind Mr. Meredith—have I ever told you about him and Roma, Phil?—well, anybody can get round him, and he believes in Uncle Belassis.

'Come home soon, Phil, or he will cheat you right and left. You mustn't pretend to

think so, but he will. I do so want to see you. I know you will have grown so tall, and handsome, and strong, and bronzed—everyone does who has travelled like you. You will find yourself such a lion here. People have been dying to see you these two months and more.

'And oh, Phil dear, you *will* take Aunt Olive and me to live with you in Ladywell Manor, won't you? like a sweet angel boy as I know you are! We are so miserable here, though I can't quite explain why. I think it is the *atmosphere* of the place that is so oppressive, and the feeling they always try to impress upon us that we are living *on charity*, though I know I'm not. Aunt Olive is a dear old thing; I know you'll be very fond of her. It would be lovely to live with you at Ladywell, it is such a splendid old place; for Uncle Maynard was not a bit miserly where his house and garden were concerned, and spent any amount of money upon them. We shall be so happy there altogether if you will come and live there, and let us keep house for you. Do, *do*, dear Phil! and mind you come straight off home

directly you get this, for we are all just dying to see you.

'I am nearly twenty-four now, and I think you will find me *rather* nice-looking. When I am nicely dressed I fancy myself a good deal, but they don't often give me nice things to wear. But they can't stop my hair growing thick and long and curling prettily, which it does—beautifully. Matilda has to curl her fringe with tongs, and is always singeing the ends off, and then she looks such a guy; and Bertha wears a false front of ridiculous little curls! She has to put them into curl-papers on damp nights!

'When I'm twenty-four I ought to be rich; but they tell me now that there's a condition —I don't know what—if I don't do it I shall get very little. I wonder what the condition is. I shall comply with it if I can, for I should like to be rich. I suppose you don't know any better than I? When my birthday comes I shall be told, I suppose, and that will be very soon indeed now.

'Good-bye, dearest old boy. Write directly, and say that you'll come as fast as ever you can travel. I've no end more to say, but it's

post-time, and I must stop. Aunt Olive sends best love.

'Yours for ever,

'MAUD.

'Thornton House.'

'Well,' said Tor, laying down this last letter and pushing his hands through his hair, 'I'll be hanged if I know what to do!'

He sat still awhile, and then he rose and paced the room in silent thought; and then he sat down again and shook his fist at his unconscious companion.

'Phil, you villain, why on earth were you such an ass as to get sunstroke at such a critical time as this? A nice puzzle you have put me into! What on earth is to be done? If I write and state Phil's condition, why then that old scoundrel will go on feathering his nest finely out of this property, and the old aunt and pretty sister will be horribly disappointed and will have to stay on to be bullied by the estimable uncle. And then when Phil does come to himself, he will be sure to be weak in the head for a bit; and

he never has too much backbone, and that Belassis will just turn him round his fingers, and goodness knows what the end will be!

'Then there's Maud: she is coming of age soon—that may mean in a week or two, for aught I know. From what old Maynard says, I imagine the condition she speaks of is a marriage with Lewis Belassis. Somebody ought to be there to stop that, if possible. Without support she may let herself be bullied into it. Confound it all! What is a fellow to do?

'Could I get a power of attorney drawn up, authorizing me to act for Phil till his recovery? That might be a good plan, only he can't sign it. Could I sign it for him? He has modelled his handwriting upon mine so long that I can hardly distinguish them myself. He has written to no one but Maud for ten years at least, and to her he merely signs "Phil." His actual signature is unknown to anyone; mine would do just as well—my representation of it. But then—stop—no, that would be too dangerous a game to play. It would have to come out all about his stroke and illness, and

some one might start the reasonable objection that a man in Phil's state couldn't sign a power of attorney.'

Tor thought long and earnestly. Plan after plan entered his head, only to be found, upon a little study, hopelessly impracticable. Half an hour passed in vain speculation, and then an inspiration seemed to seize him; he paused, and slowly a strange expression stole over his face, and his eyes began to shine with a variety of stirring thoughts. When he spoke again, it was with peculiar deliberation and composure.

'Yes, certainly that seems the best and simplest plan, just to personate Phil—change names and positions with him, until he is in a fit state to act for himself. No one over there has seen him since he was ten, so that my extra inches and more Saxon complexion cannot tell against me. Phil always says that his hair was light as a child. His eyes are brown, and mine, I suppose, are grey; I don't think there is any danger there. His mother is dead; and nobody else would be likely to remember details. I know just as much as Phil does about his people and his

affairs. I think I could play the part without any fear of betraying myself.'

Tor paced up and down reflectively.

'I suppose it would be looked upon as a criminal fraud if detected, and would be punishable by law; but then only Phil could prosecute, and as soon as ever he comes to himself he will hear all, and then he can act for himself, whilst I shall abdicate in his favour. I don't think, without Phil's evidence, anyone could prove me an impostor. I think I can personate Philip Debenham without the least fear of detection.

'Of course I do not know the places he lived in till he was ten—that is something of a drawback; but I think I am clever enough to keep my ignorance to myself till I have mastered the situation: and I shall not have to undergo a cross-examination, like the Claimant. Phil saw next to nothing of the Belassis set during his childhood. Places and people change vastly in eighteen years, and all that time spent knocking about the world can account for a good deal of forgetfulness. I do not feel nervous there.

'Yes, it certainly is the only feasible plan

for thwarting Uncle Belassis, rescuing Aunt Olive and Maud, and perhaps saving my sister from what is likely to prove a disastrous marriage (I quite rise to the situation, and already feel surrounded by relations). Phil would be delighted could he but enter into the scheme. He would rejoice to put upon my shoulders the responsibility of the first battles with Uncle Belassis. I wish he could stand by to witness my personification of himself. He would thoroughly enjoy it; but he must wait till I can tell the tale in days to come.

'As to money, I shall of course use my own for all personal matters; his for the estate and his sister's comforts. Stay, I cannot sign his cheques and mine too. Now, let me see: I am Philip Debenham; that fellow is Torrington Torwood. I must take him away from here, and leave him in the charge of some capable medical man under his new name. And before I assume my new name I must draw out a good round sum of money; and to avoid trouble, in case Phil is long like this, advise my bankers to honour, until further notice, cheques signed "Philip Debenham for

T. Torwood." They will think me cracked, but they must do it.'

Tor suited the action to the words. He wrote out a cheque for £500 (he always kept a heavy balance at the bank, being a prudent man), and a paper empowering Philip Debenham to sign his cheques. His own signature ('T. Torwood') he made feeble and shaky.

'Now,' said he, drawing a long breath, 'I have signed my own name for the last time. Henceforth I am Philip Debenham.'

In his new capacity he proceeded to write three letters.

The first was to the bankers to state that his friend Mr. Torwood was seriously ill, and the doctors feared the brain had suffered; so that in fear of what might ensue he had empowered the writer to act for him in all business and pecuniary matters, and desired that his signature should be honoured at the bank, as the enclosed paper testified.

Tor did not know whether such a paper required the signature to be witnessed, but, to avoid any awkward results on this point, he got two innocent Kammermädchens to put their names to it without having the least notion

what they were doing, or without knowing that they were even supposed to have seen it signed.

The remaining letters were to Uncle Belassis and to Maud, briefly informing them of his intention of coming at once to England. He hoped to be with them in a week's time.

All these letters were duly signed Philip Debenham.

The plunge was taken.

CHAPTER III.

DR. SCHNEEBERGER.

YES; the plunge was taken, the die was cast. Torrington Torwood had taken upon himself the personification of Philip Debenham, and by the time that he had posted with his invalid friend from the little village of Hornberg to the town of Freyburg, he had quite accustomed himself to his altered circumstances.

On the outskirts of Freyburg lived a German physician, who had devoted much time to the study of the human brain, and who had attained to a considerable reputation in the eyes of his contemporaries. Tor's German education had made him conversant with the names of most of the eminent men of the day, and very glad had he been to hear that Dr. Schneeberger was now living near Freyburg in comparative

retirement, whilst he prosecuted his studies and gave up the bulk of his time to the production of a scientific work, which was to make his name and his fame all over Europe.

Tor had attended some of the doctor's lectures in past years, and knew him for as simple-minded and kind-hearted a little oddity as ever trod shoe-leather; and therefore, without any misgiving or hesitation, he drove the unconscious Phil straight to the doctor's own modest abode.

Dr. Schneeberger was at home, and Tor was admitted to his study, where the little spectacled, sharp-faced man was seated at his microscope, amid heaps of manuscripts and piles of books.

The handsome young Englishman, in fluent German, made his apologies for his intrusion, which were readily accepted, after which Tor opened his case.

He and his friend Mr. Torwood were travelling companions, and had been so for many years; but unfortunately his friend had been struck down by a severe sunstroke some days ago, and had remained unconscious ever since. Important business now summoned him, the speaker, to England—business which admitted

of no delay; and as he had heard that Dr. Schneeberger occasionally admitted under his roof patients who were suffering from injury to the brain, he had taken the liberty of bringing Mr. Torwood to him, to request him, as a great favour, to receive him as a patient, and allow him to remain there until he had recovered, and could follow his friend to England. Dr. Schneeberger could name his own terms; whatever sum he fixed upon should be paid.

The doctor rubbed his hands together, scratched his head, and in affable tones asked a few questions about Herr Torwood's constitution and the occasion of the stroke. He seemed interested in what he heard, and when he understood that the patient was in a carriage at his own door, he jumped up and trotted off to have a look at him.

Tor's cause was won. Phil's case interested the little doctor. The patient was carried up to a clean, bare, thoroughly German bedroom, and Dr. Schneeberger made a most careful examination of his condition.

Tor, who had some business to get through before starting for England, took up his quarters at the hotel, and sent off a good

many telegraphic messages ; and in a few hours' time repaired to the doctor's house to hear his verdict as to Phil's condition.

'I will undertake the case of your friend, mein Herr, for it interests me ; but I am sure there is more injury than is to be accounted for by the sunstroke. I suspect a slight effusion on the brain, from the rupture of some tiny vessel : there are symptoms of compression, which are not to be explained by a simple sunstroke.'

Tor looked disturbed.

'You do not think him seriously ill, I hope?'

'Everything, my dear young friend, that affects the human brain is serious. The brain is a most wonderful and complicated structure. I could demonstrate to you, by the aid of my microscope, how——'

'Excuse me, doctor, but you have made me anxious. You do not mean to say that you consider my friend's life in danger?'

Such a complication as Phil's death, before his assumption of his own name and position, could not be contemplated without a shudder.

The doctor raised his hands with a gesture of horror.

'Oh no, no, no—*nein*, *nein*—not at all, my dear sir—not at all; pray do not alarm yourself needlessly. Herr Torwood's life is in no danger at all, so far as my experience goes—none whatever; but the case is, nevertheless, a serious one—all cases of compression are serious. He may be a long while getting over it—he may remain many weeks in his present state. You called him "unconscious;" but that is hardly the correct word to use. He is in a torpid helpless state, and to you he seems insensible; but medically speaking, it is not real coma. Still, he is absolutely incapable of any thought or volition, and his mind is all astray; and this condition of torpor may last some while. I heard of a case somewhat similar, where the balance of the faculties was not restored for above a year.'

Tor listened aghast. Dr. Schneeberger's innocent zeal filled him with dismay, akin to irritation.

'You do not mean that you think my friend will be a year in recovering?' he asked sharply.

'My dear sir, no, a thousand times no; such

cases are *most* rare; it may never be my good fortune to meet with one like it. I merely mentioned the matter to show you how impossible it was to say how long a time will elapse before a patient will recover his full consciousness. Your friend will, in all probability, make far more rapid progress. Still, if there is, as I suspect, some slight effusion of blood upon the brain, it may be some while before the system will re-absorb it.'

'Can nothing be done?' questioned Tor impatiently. 'Would any operation hasten his recovery? As it happens just now, it is of great importance that he should be able to return soon to England; affairs there require his presence. Can you do nothing of that sort, doctor?'

Dr. Schneeberger shook his head, and his odd, expressive face put on a shrewd look of gravity.

'Mein Herr, I would not attempt such a thing, save as a last resort. If Nature can do her work alone, be sure she will do it best herself, and in her own way, and at her own time. Do you know the secret of my success in my profession? Simply this, that I study

Nature closely, and let her alone whenever it is possible. If she cannot work unassisted, I give her what assistance lies in my power; but I never interfere with her unless I am obliged. Nature will cure your friend in due course if she has her way. My part is to stand by and see fair play, that is all.'

Tor pulled at his moustache, and considered.

'Well, doctor,' he said at length, 'you know your own business best, of course, and I must leave the matter in your hands. You lay me under a great obligation by undertaking the case. Will you grant me one favour more? The moment you see any sign of returning consciousness will you telegraph to me? I am most anxious to be with my friend when he comes to himself. I will travel night and day to secure that object.'

The little doctor rubbed his hands together—his favourite gesture when in any doubt—and smiled benignantly upon his young English friend.

'Mein Herr, I will do all I can to facilitate your wishes; but you know it is quite possible your friend may recover his faculties

quite suddenly—in an hour—in a moment of time. No one can say how it will be in such cases; whether recovery will come by slow degrees or like a lightning-flash. If possible, I will give you due warning; in any case, you will be immediately summoned; but that you can be with him at the moment of his recovery no one can promise.'

'Oh, he may come to himself any minute, may he?' mused Tor half aloud; and a momentary expression of perplexity crossed his face.

It cleared away quickly, however, and the young man turned to the doctor with a frank smile.

'In that case, doctor, I will mention to you rather a curious thing that happened a few months back, when my friend was seized with cramp whilst bathing, and became unconscious before I could get him to shore. When he came to himself he was completely confused for several hours as to his own identity and mine. He could not rid himself of the notion that *he* was Philip Debenham—myself, that is; whilst I was, he declared, Torrington Torwood, which is, as you know, his own name. I do

not know, of course, whether he would do the same thing again after a prolonged period of unconsciousness; but in case he should wake up under the strange conviction that he is Philip Debenham, and inquire anxiously for his friend Torwood, you will know better what to make of it.'

'Quite so, quite so; a most unusual phase; a most interesting circumstance. Mr. Debenham, your friend shall receive every care I can bestow upon him. His brain interests me much. Confusion of identity! A most remarkable thing!'

The simple-minded little doctor gave all credence to what Tor told him. Suspicion was no part of his nature. He looked at everything from a psychological and professional point of view, and was delighted to get hold of any patient whose symptoms might give him a clearer insight into his favourite subject.

Dr. Schneeberger had a sister Gretchen, as kind-hearted and simple-minded as himself, and given over, in true German fashion, to household cares and domestic management. She was highly prepossessed in favour of the

distinguished-looking young Englishman and his helpless friend, and made many protestations as to the care the latter should receive whilst under their roof.

Tor's mind was relieved of all fear on Phil's account, feeling confident that he would be well looked after, and only dismayed by the length of time which might possibly ensue before he should recover sufficiently to assume his own name and position, and free Tor from the *rôle* he had assumed.

Tor dined with the doctor and his sister, and was put through quite a catechism by the innocently-inquisitive Gretchen, as to his history and antecedents, and his prospective visit to England. It seemed ungracious to be too reserved towards those who had shown him kindness and consideration; so Tor told the little German Hausfrau how he had come into a property in the west of England, and had to go over to take possession, and to see his relatives, from whom he had long been absent. He did not say more than was needful, feeling strange in his adopted character, and rather fearful of making a slip; but one thing led to another, one question to many

more, and before they rose from table Tor felt that he was indeed Philip Debenham, and that no drawing back was possible now.

'I did not mean to say so much,' he mused, as he went slowly upstairs to Phil's room; 'but, after all, what does it matter? It is good practice. A slip here would matter little; over there it might be fatal. Confound that fellow! Why can't he wake up and act for himself? Suppose he lies like that for months? a devil of a mess I may have got myself into by that time! Was I a great fool ever to make this attempt? If that Belassis wasn't such an old scoundrel, and didn't lead that poor girl such a life, I don't suppose I should ever have thought of such a thing. Well, I'm in for it now; I can't draw back; I must go through with it till Phil comes to himself, and then I can vanish like Mephistopheles, and never appear again. I think I can manage to annoy Uncle Belassis more than a little before I abdicate in favour of Phil. Uncle Belassis, I have some very strong suspicions as to your honesty and integrity. I think you and I will enjoy some private con-

versations together which poor old easy-going Phil might have spared you.'

By which speech it may be seen that Tor looked forward with mixed feelings to his *début* in England as Philip Debenham, but that, on the whole, the careless daring of his nature inclined him to relish the situation more than he feared it.

Naturally, a few days' consideration had made him think more seriously of his scheme than he had done at first, and the fear that Phil might be long in coming to his relief added not a little to his perplexities. However, as he said to himself, it was too late now to draw back, and all that remained to be done was to take every care that the truth should not leak out before the appointed time.

His first idea had been to leave amongst Phil's possessions a sealed paper, informing him briefly of his accession to wealth, and what step he (Tor) had taken to defeat Uncle Belassis, and release Maud and the aunt from his guardianship. On second thoughts, however, he decided to leave behind no such dangerous document, which, were a suspicion once aroused, and an inquiry instituted, would

damn him, and, for aught he knew, clap him into prison at once.

No, he would leave no evidence of any kind behind him. He and Phil had not been close friends for nearly eighteen years for nothing. No misunderstanding could arise in Phil's mind concerning Tor's actions; and besides that, the moment he showed any sign of consciousness Tor was to be summoned. Even should Phil awake suddenly, he must wait where he was until his friend came to him, and then all would be made clear, and the two could return together to install Phil in his own rightful place.

That point settled, there only remained to make an interchange of such little possessions as bore upon them the names of their respective owners. Fortunately none of their clothes were marked, for Tor's greater height would have rendered an exchange of garments impossible; but a few little trifles, as knives, pocket-books and cigar-cases, had initials traced upon them, and these were all carefully sorted out and allotted to their wrong owners.

Phil's watch and chain and a signet-ring

upon his finger had been already appropriated, for both had belonged to Mr. Debenham, and would be strong evidence as to identity.

'I don't suppose it will occur to anyone to dispute that, however,' said Tor to himself, 'for I don't know how a man sets to work in a general way to prove that he's himself. Anyway, I could quite as easily prove myself Philip Debenham as Torrington Torwood, if it comes to that, and I suppose that is all that is necessary.'

That same evening Tor said farewell to the kind little doctor and his sister, and to the unconscious Phil, and started on his journey to England.

He had left with Dr. Schneeberger the money that had been sent to Phil by the lawyer; but he was put out and vexed to find, when he had got twelve hours on his way to England, that he had carelessly left behind amongst Phil's things the £500 he had drawn out of his own bank, which was nearly all in English notes. He remembered how the blunder had been made; it was during the exchange of personal effects. He had exchanged pocket-books and had omitted to change the

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contents, and the £500 was left in the possession of his friend.

It was too late to recover the money now, he could not go back for it; and he was not afraid that anyone in that simple, primitive household would even discover its existence, much less appropriate it. In his easy-going way he decided to let it remain there, unknown to anyone, until he visited Phil, and then he could decide what was to be done.

'After all, it does not much matter,' he said to himself; 'that £500 must be Phil's, and I will draw out £500 of his in its place. I meant only to use his money for the house and estate; but after all, when I first arrive it would seem odd not to want any cash for personal expenses. Yes; I must be careful not to do anything to excite suspicion. Nobody will have any reason to be suspicious, that I can see; still Uncle Belassis would be an ugly customer to deal with, I doubt not, if he did get any idea of the sort into his head, and he will naturally pry into everything, until I have succeeded in kicking him out. I shall do that as speedily as possible,

but undue rashness and heat may defeat their own ends. I must be circumspect.'

So Tor smoked and meditated and slept at intervals, during his hasty night and day journey, and became more and more at home with his new name and dignity.

On board the boat that bore him across the Channel, the idea of the meeting with his kindred was the uppermost in his mind.

'I suppose I must kiss Maud—a man is always expected to kiss his sisters, of course. Well, she won't be shy, so I suppose I need not be either ; and at my time of life it would be a needless fabrication to pretend I had never kissed a pretty girl before—nobody would believe it. It may be a little awkward for us both when the true hero appears, but that cannot be helped, and I shall so soon vanish into obscurity that matters cannot become trying.

'I fancy in the capacity of nephew I must embrace Aunt Olive, too. What a capital thing it is the old lady and Maud being such cronies ! Maud could never have come to Ladywell without the aunt, and I should have been sadly put about for an excuse for keeping

her away; but with the two there appearances will be saved, Mrs. Grundy silenced (when the true heir turns up), and I can come and go as I please.

'I hope I shall be equal to the occasion if unknown relations or ancient friends turn up; but I think I know as much about everybody there as Phil does, except for the blind Mr. Meredith whom I do not think he ever mentioned to me. There is Matilda with the singed front locks, and Bertha with the false ones; and the son Lewis who is sure to be a cad, and whose marriage with Maud I am to stop, which I am convinced I shall do *con amore*. Yes, I feel equal to the ordeal; my spirits rise to the occasion. I am quite anticipating the happy meeting between my long-lost family and myself!'

CHAPTER IV.

THE EXILE'S RETURN.

FIVE ladies were assembled in the drawing-room of Thornton House, and all five appeared to be in a state of expectancy, which in the cases of one or two amounted to positive excitement.

It was a bright, hot evening in May, and the windows of the room stood open to the soft air without. This was an advantage as far as Maud Debenham was concerned, as she could hear the sound of approaching wheels from her position in the room, without wandering perpetually into the hall, as she felt disposed to do, only that her aunt had just forbidden any such 'exhibition of restlessness.'

Mrs. Belassis sat in an easy-chair, with a gorgeous piece of silk embroidery upon her lap, at which she worked diligently; and yet,

to those who knew her well, it was evident that she was listening with some impatience for an arrival which was every moment expected—the arrival of her nephew, Philip Debenham. She was a handsome woman, but with no softness or sweetness in her beauty. Her face was cold in colouring and expression, and the well-formed features were on a large and commanding scale. Her eyes were dark and penetrating, and there was no kindliness in their keen glance, and the sentiment they most often expressed was suspicion, contempt, or dislike. There was a certain power and cleverness in the face, but no trace of tenderness. Many people admired Mrs. Belassis, many came to consult her and to ask her advice; but no one loved her, or would dream of looking for sympathy from her in any trouble of mind or body. People only had their own folly to thank for nine-tenths of the ills that befell them, she affirmed, and therefore sympathy and assistance were misplaced if lavished upon them. It was a comfortable creed to hold, and one which her husband was more than willing to accept. It absolved them so satisfactorily from all claims of

charity or benevolence. Mrs. Belassis was a hard, self-willed woman, and she looked it every inch.

Sisters are frequently the very antithesis of each other, and so it was with the daughters of the late Mr. Charles Maynard. Olive, the youngest, the quiet, white-haired widow, who sat at work in a retired nook, was as gentle and loving by nature as Celia was hard and proud. She looked years older than Mrs. Belassis, for her hair was like silver, and the small thin face was seamed with tiny wrinkles. Only the skin retained some of its old softness and bloom, and the expression worn by the patient, peaceful face was one of childlike trust and tenderness. Maud often told her aunt Olive that she was 'the loveliest old lady in the world,' which, if not strictly true, did not convey an impression altogether wrong, for the little widow was beautiful in many eyes besides those of her niece.

The two daughters of Mrs. Belassis were engaged in their favourite occupation of novel-reading, which did not prevent them from talking as much as they read.

Matilda was fair, fat, and somewhat puffy-

looking. She laboured under the delusion that she was a beauty, which was strange, because she was possessed of a figure which certainly had no great beauty, whilst her features were heavy and badly made, though not exactly ugly, and her whole appearance was, what her sister summed up in the expressive word, 'sloppy.' She also believed her manners to be fascinating and her conversation enlivening; but there seemed no particular ground for this article of belief.

Bertha was a brunette, and possessed of much more activity and vivacity than her sister. She would have been 'fast,' had her mother permitted it, or had she understood how to make herself so. As matters stood, she contented herself with an assumption of high-spirited audacity which she took for wit, but which Maud, with cousinly candour, often pronounced to be simple rudeness. She was possessed of a pair of keen restless dark eyes, marked, irregular features, and a very sharp, sarcastic tongue. Her forehead was concealed by a mass of tiny dark curls, and the sallowness of her skin gave something almost foreign to her appearance. She did not set up for a

beauty like Matilda, but she did believe very firmly in her own cleverness.

Maud Debenham was in pleasing contrast to her two cousins. She had a small, oval face, delicately formed features, and a pair of dark violet-blue eyes with long black lashes. Her hair, which was very plentiful, was of a soft dusky brown, without any gloss—wavy, wayward hair, which never looked altogether neat and tidy, but with which it would nevertheless be hard to find fault, unless, like Mrs. Belassis, one were very orderly and trim. Without being a beauty, Maud was a bright, sweet-faced, unaffected English girl, with plenty of spirit and a decided will of her own, and yet a happy facility of disposition which had enabled her to bear cheerfully an uncongenial yoke of dependence, and to retain her gay spirits in adverse circumstances.

Her bright face was flushed with excitement at the present moment, and her slight, graceful figure flitted from window to window with an ever-increasing restlessness, though her movements were studiously quiet. The silence without seemed to cause her much disappointment.

'That horrid old coach must have been late. He ought to have been here ages ago. How I do *hate* waiting!' sighed she at last.

'If you had taken my advice, and settled yourself to some occupation, you would not find waiting so wearisome,' said Mrs. Belassis, in measured tones.

Maud shrugged her shoulders behind her aunt's back, and only murmured again:

'I do wish he would come. I hate waiting.'

'I dare say he has stopped at the Ladywell Arms to "liquor up,"' cried Bertha flippantly, throwing her book on one side. 'I think that's a way travellers have.'

'Don't be vulgar, Bertha,' returned Maud quickly. 'As though Phil would do that!'

'He will be here fast enough,' said Matilda, yawning. 'What is the use of being so impatient?'

Matilda was in reality as anxious as anyone for the arrival of the traveller, but she assumed an indifference she was far from feeling. A bachelor cousin, the owner of a fine property and a handsome income, was a man of importance in many eyes. To Matilda he was as

interesting an individual as the world could hold.

'Hark!' cried Maud suddenly; 'I hear wheels. He is coming. I am sure it is he! Yes, yes; I know it is the dogcart!' And she made a quick rush towards the door.

'Come back, Maud!' said Mrs. Belassis coldly. 'Wait here till your brother comes.'

'Oh, Aunt Célia!' she remonstrated rebelliously, yet knowing remonstrance was vain.

But she had not long to wait. In two minutes the door was thrown open, whilst the servant announced:

'Mr. Debenham.'

It was not the Phil of Maud's dreams who now entered—the slight, dark, bright-eyed youth, like the pictures of the former Debenhams which had hung in her old home, and which were all of the type she herself closely resembled. This Phil was much taller, much more strongly built, with tawny hair and sun-browned skin, more like the ideal traveller from far-off lands than the dimly remembered brother of her childhood's home.

But it was Phil himself, her own brother, come back to her at last; and that was enough

for Maud. She sprang towards him, put her arms about his neck, and covered his face with kisses.

'Phil—my own dear, darling Phil! How delightful it is to have you back!'

The traveller took her face between his hands and looked into it with smiling eyes. Then he kissed her on brow and lips.

'Is it really Maud? little Maud of old days? What a metamorphosis!'

'Should you have known me? I am like papa—like all the Debenhams. But you are like nobody—ever so much better-looking. Oh, it is so good to have you back!'

'Thanks, little sister; but see, you must introduce me to my aunts and cousins. Remember, I am quite a stranger to them all.'

Maud led him forward with sisterly pride, and did as he requested.

Tor (with a terrible consciousness of the humorous side of the question, and with the feeling of one who is acting a hastily prepared part in a play, where a false word or look will be the ruin of everything) went through his part with a seeming ease of manner and with

a graceful cordiality that was greatly to his credit.

His keen eyes dwelt successively upon each relative presented to him, and he summed up their characters pretty accurately at the first glance.

'That woman may be dangerous,' he said, looking at Mrs. Belassis. 'But, for the rest, I think I have not much to fear.'

They all sat down after the first hubbub of greeting had subsided, and that inevitable pause of semi-embarrassment ensued, which for a moment nobody seemed ready to break.

'Was the coach late?' asked Maud at length. 'We have been expecting you such a while!'

'We got in in good time, I fancy,' answered Tor. 'Only I got old Adam to drive round by our old home, Maud. I thought I should like one peep at the garden and the dear old orchard where we used to play; don't you remember? It all looks just the same; but what a shame they have pulled down the old house!'

'Yes; isn't it? Weren't you pleased to find old Adam still extant? He would drive him-

self to meet you, though he is so old. Did you know each other?'

'Well, we were not long making ourselves known. Yes, I was very pleased indeed to see him. We had fine talks over old times. It brought a host of matters to my mind which I believe I had quite forgotten.'

Indeed, that six miles' drive with the garrulous old servant had been of inestimable value to Tor, and had been turned already to profitable account.

'Do you remember this house, Philip?' asked Matilda languidly.

'Not distinctly, at all,' answered Tor, looking round him. 'I don't think I was much here as a child, was I?'

Bertha laughed sarcastically.

'Ah, you have not forgotten what a welcome you always received from Lewis—not to mention other names.'

Mrs. Belassis quenched her daughter's untimely reminiscences by a stony stare. Tor quietly changed the subject.

'Where is my old antagonist, Lewis? Is he at home, or abroad?'

'At home,' answered Mrs. Belassis (whilst

Maud added in a whisper, 'Worse luck!') 'He will be in almost immediately, and your uncle too. They were sorry business obliged them to be out at your first arrival.'

'I hope—my uncle—is well,' said Tor, with just enough of hesitation in pronouncing the name to give it a rather significant emphasis.

'Quite well, thank you,' answered Mrs. Belassis, raising her piercing glance for a moment to his face. 'You will be glad to see him again. It is some years since you met.'

'Eighteen, only,' answered Tor quietly. 'I imagine I must have been an uncommonly disagreeable kind of child, as not one of my relatives, save Maud and Aunt Olive, ever expressed the smallest wish even to set eyes upon me, since the far-off day when I was banished to Heidelberg. I wonder if I have at all improved since then?'

Tor spoke lightly, but his shaft struck home, as he had meant it should. He was in reality fighting his friend's battle, not his own, and he was indignant at the treatment Phil had received from his kindred.

'Travelling was costly, many years ago,

answered Mrs. Belassis calmly. 'And for the past ten years, since you elected to live with your friend, you have been your own master, and have never paid us a visit.'

'Visitors generally wait to be asked, mamma,' quoth Bertha pertly. 'And you never would ask poor Phil. Maud and I have often begged you to.'

The conversation was becoming a little too pointed, and Maud was too happy to feel spiteful towards anyone, so at this juncture she interposed:

'Oh, Phil, what did Tor say to parting with you? I always call him Tor, because you do, and I've quite forgotten his real name. Was he very much disgusted at your running away? Why didn't you bring him with you?'

'Perhaps I should have done so, if I could. It seems quite odd to be without him; but the fact is, he's ill—it was a sunstroke, and he has been ill ever since. He is under the care of a German doctor, and I hope he will soon be well.'

'Poor Tor!' said Maud. 'I should like to see him. He has been very good to you, hasn't he, Phil?'

'Yes; we have been chums a long while now, and very good times we have had together. Yes, he saved me from a very uncongenial fate—an office-desk.'

'As things have turned out,' said Mrs. Belassis drily, 'you can afford to be grateful to your *friend.* Had you quarrelled, or had he died or even married, and left you without any means of support, or any profession by which you could earn a living, you would have felt differently towards him and towards those whose efforts for your welfare you thought fit to despise. By a mere chance, an eccentric will has made a rich man of you; but for that, you would sooner or later have had to taste the bitterness of poverty and beggary.'

Tor smiled carelessly.

'I should at least not have begged from mine uncle. I might even have managed to support myself by my own handiwork, had that dreadful fate befallen me—the necessity to earn my own bread.'

'I am glad to hear it, Philip. That being the case, I am only surprised that you have been content to live so long upon charity.'

Tor laughed carelessly. Such a suggestion merely amused him. It might have hurt the true Phil.

'I perceive I have reached the realistic country, where everything is reckoned by pounds, shillings, and pence. In friendship we calculate differently. Tor always said—and he spoke truly, I believe—that the debt of gratitude was mutual.'

'Your friend must be romantic,' remarked Mrs. Belassis, taking up her work.

'On the contrary,' returned Tor, with a little significance, 'I believe him to be a most practical man.'

'I am glad to hear it. It must have been an advantage to you to have such a friend.'

'Undoubtedly so. Perhaps when my uncle and I proceed to business, he will find that I too have learned to be practical.'

It certainly was unpremeditated, this interchange of hostilities; for though masked under a show of friendliness, Mrs. Belassis and Tor quite understood the antagonism which had already sprung up between them. Mrs. Belassis was a woman who liked to reign

supreme, and to feel that her will dominated over all others. Anyone who declined to submit to her sway became at once suspected and disliked. And it hardly needed any demonstration to prove that Tor had not the smallest intention of yielding to her. She had found out so much before he had spoken half a dozen sentences.

Matilda and Bertha were annoyed with their mother, and thought it very hard that their handsome cousin should be browbeaten like that before he had been half an hour in the house; but they stood too much in awe of Mrs. Belassis to remonstrate, and were greatly impressed by the fact that Tor seemed quite equal to hold his own, even against his redoubtable aunt.

In fact Mrs. Belassis seemed for the moment to be silenced, and perhaps she was relieved from a passing feeling of embarrassment by the entrance of her husband and son.

Tor rose and advanced to meet them.

'I suppose, sir, that I shall have to introduce myself anew to you. In all probability I have changed more than you, I see, have done.'

Mr. Belassis seized his nephew's hand and shook it with great show of cordiality.

He was a man of heavy build and unprepossessing physiognomy. His features were somewhat coarse, but they lacked the open frankness which most of the type possess. There was a craftiness in his smile, and a stealthy cat-like expression was stamped upon his broad red face. His small brown eyes were placed too near together for symmetry, and were full of cunning and a certain lynx-like watchfulness which was not at all pleasant. To Tor, who was well used to reading men's faces, he was simply repulsive.

'Very good, Uncle Belassis,' he said to himself. 'I think I see what kind of a customer you will prove. You are quite as nasty as I expected; but not so clever—not half so clever as your wife. So much the better for me.'

Tor paid small heed to the oily words of welcome which were being poured upon him. He was mentally taking the measure of the man before him, and if Mr. Belassis had understood the cause of the smile which passed across the bronzed face, he might have felt less at ease than before.

'Well, Phil,' said the younger man, holding out his hand, 'I suppose we neither of us retain a vivid recollection of the other. However, we can soon make up for lost time. Glad to see you, old fellow!'

'Thanks,' answered Tor. 'Yes, I believe our old friendship chiefly consisted in punching each other's heads; that, at least, is the prevailing impression on my mind.'

'I believe that was about the state of the case!' said Lewis, with a laugh. 'Strikes me if we tried that game on now, you would have distinctly the best of it. How you have grown!'

Tor laughed in his turn.

'I might say the same. Boys do generally grow after ten.'

'Why, yes; but you're a Hercules. Can't think where you get your inches from. Great height isn't in the family.'

'I suppose knocking about the world has done it. Roughing it in all climates is supposed to make a man tall, I believe. Well, it's pleasant to be back in the old place again. Can't say I have a vivid recollection of it; but it will all come back in time, I don't doubt.'

'I'll take you everywhere to-morrow, and show you everything,' cried Maud eagerly. 'Oh, it is so delightful to have you at last!'

'I shall be nobody now, I suppose, Maud,' said Lewis gloomily. 'You will have nothing to say to me now, of course.'

Maud laughed, and shrugged her shoulders.

'I don't know that I ever did have very much to say; and if so, I've no doubt it was all said long ago. Why should I have anything particular to say to you?'

Lewis made no reply; but Mrs. Belassis said, in her incisive way:

'You are a very foolish, pert girl, Maud. You never will take advice nor act with propriety.'

Maud tossed her head, and looked at Tor for the smile of encouragement which came readily enough. He understood better than she did the full meaning of the words that had been spoken.

Lewis stood pulling at his moustache, and watching Maud. He was a good-looking fellow enough, this young Belassis, for he had inherited his mother's handsome features and dark eyes, without any of her hardness and

severity. There was nothing of that in Lewis's face; on the contrary, it was somewhat weak and indecisive in expression. He was an only son, and had been greatly indulged, but though his life had been a pleasant one, it had not brought out the strong side of his character—supposing that he had one—and he was easy-going, self-indulgent, and indeterminate. He was very much in love with his pretty cousin, who was, he believed, destined to be his wife; but although Maud liked him very well, and allowed him to follow her about like a dog, she had no special regard for him, and in her heart despised his small masculine vanities and foibles more than a little.

Mrs. Belassis rose majestically from her seat.

'We are dining late to-night, that all our party might have time to assemble. It is time to dress. Maud, show your brother his room.'

When she was alone with her husband, he asked at once:

'What do you think of him?'

'He is dangerous,' answered the wife emphatically.

'How so?'

'He suspects and hates us, I am all but certain; and he has all his wits about him.'

Mr. Belassis' face put on an unpleasing look of mingled fear and craftiness.

'Who could have thought it? The Debenhams have always been unsuspecting fools.'

'Philip is neither one nor the other. You must be very cautious, Alfred.'

Mr. Belassis broke out with an exclamation which would sound decidedly strong if written down.

'What could have induced the old fool to make such a will? and how dares that boy take such a stand as that? He's no true Debenham if he has a will of his own. Who could have guessed things would have turned out so unluckily?'

CHAPTER V.

PHILIP'S SISTER.

'NOW, Phil, at last we have got you to ourselves—I thought we never should do it. Oh, there is such a lot to say, I don't know where to begin!'

This was Maud's exclamation as, after some skilful manœuvring, she escaped with Tor into the twilight stillness of the quiet garden, where in a secluded summer-house Mrs. Lorraine, the sweet-faced Aunt Olive, was sitting as if waiting for them.

Tor had hardly heard the gentle voice of the widow in the confusion of many tongues at the dinner-table, but her face had attracted him; and when Maud pulled him forward, exclaiming: 'Now, kiss Aunt Olive—kiss her as often as you like, for she's the sweetest,

dearest aunt in all the world!' then Tor stepped forward and did her bidding willingly, feeling wonderfully little ashamed of the deception he was practising upon two confiding women, and growing marvellously contented with his present position.

'My dear Philip, my own poor Maud's darling boy!' murmured Aunt Olive tenderly. 'I can hardly believe you are the little Philip who went away eighteen years ago. You were so like your father then, and your mother too, and now I cannot see a trace of either.'

'He is like nobody but himself, and I am glad of it!' cried Maud, leaning against his shoulder as he sat beside Aunt Olive, and caressing his curly head. 'He is just my own dear, darling Phil! Oh, Phil, we will have good times now you have come back!'

'We will so!' answered Tor emphatically; 'and if I find upon inquiry that that precious uncle of ours has been making himself disagreeable to you in my absence, I shall speak my mind to him candidly and freely.'

Aunt Olive clasped her wrinkled hands

together and looked anxious. Maud laughed triumphantly.

'Oh, Phil, you can't think what a comfort it is to hear somebody talk like that; to feel that there is some one who dares speak out!'

'Dares?' he echoed, lifting his eyebrows. 'Do you mean you are all afraid of him?'

'I think most people are,' admitted Maud frankly. 'And then there is Aunt Celia, you know, and she is as bad every bit; and what with the two of them, one feels quite helpless.'

'You need not feel that any more,' answered Tor, with a short laugh. 'I'll pretty soon settle the pair of them if they dare to annoy you any more.'

'Oh, Phil, you're a real angel boy!' cried Maud with enthusiasm. 'Oh, Aunt Olive, isn't it splendid to hear him talk? You told me he would not dare to defy Uncle Belassis. You said papa and mamma were timid, and all the Debenhams, and that Phil would not be so bold; but you're quite wrong, aunty—quite wrong.'

'Yes, my dear; I suppose travelling about

the world does a great deal to make people brave. And I am very glad dear Philip is not afraid of your uncle, for I should not wonder —I mean, you know all the money matters—I mean, well, what shall I say? You know, I think everything ought to be looked into well; and your uncle, he does not like that kind of thing very much.'

'So my respected uncle is a scoundrel, is he?' quoth Tor coolly. 'That is the plain English of what you were saying, is it not?'

'Oh, my dear boy, you must not use such words!' cried the little widow nervously. 'Suppose he were to hear!'

'It's my private opinion he will hear uncommonly soon,' was the careless reply. 'What is there to be afraid of? I think I am equal to the task of speaking my mind, if what you say is true.'

'But, dear boy, I said nothing—I know nothing. I don't understand business, and your uncle is a lawyer, you know, and knows everything,' replied Aunt Olive, with timid haste. 'It may be all right; how can I tell? I dare say everything is just as it should be.

Only, of course, it is always better that things should be looked into by somebody else from time to time.'

Tor smiled a quiet assent, and did not pursue the subject further.

'Oh, Phil!' cried Maud, breaking in eagerly with a new subject, 'you will stay with us for good now that you've come home, won't you? You will live at Ladywell Manor—it is such a lovely old place! and you *will* let me live there with you, and Aunt Olive too, to keep house for you and take care of you? Oh, do take us away from this horrid house! You will, won't you, Phil? like a dear, darling boy!'

'My first step will be to establish you there as mistress of the house, with Aunt Olive as your companion,' answered Tor readily, knowing well what would be Phil's wishes on the subject. 'You shall be lady of the Manor, Maud, and the whole establishment will be under your sway; and if anybody dares to interfere with you, or even to criticize you—just let me know.'

'But you will be there too, Phil,' said Maud, whose face had first expressed ecstatic

delight, and then a momentary dismay. 'You will live at Ladywell yourself now?'

He laughed lightly, and gave his strong frame a little shake.

'I shall be there a great deal, no doubt. Business is business, and must be attended to. But you must remember the kind of life I have been leading for the past ten years, little sister, and not expect me to jog down into harness all in a moment. You must give me time, and let me break myself gradually of my roving habits. No doubt in time I shall settle down into a model country squire; but just at first you must not be surprised if I come and go like the Flying Dutchman, a wanderer from force of habit. But you may be quite sure that if you and Aunt Olive are established at Ladywell Manor, my visits there will not be very few nor far between.'

With that Maud had to be content, and indeed it was not difficult, for the idea of becoming the reigning power in Ladywell Manor was in itself like a dream of joy.

'Oh, Phil, you are a darling! Shall I really be free from Uncle Belassis and Aunt Celia?

Shall I really be my own mistress? It seems too good to be true!'

'You shall be as fine a lady as you choose, and free from the whole crew of them. I don't think any of them will care to offend you then.'

Maud laughed a laugh of pure happiness.

'It's like a dream or a fairy-tale, isn't it, Aunt Olive? Fancy us two living in independence and luxury at Ladywell, and with only Phil to bully us! Oh, Phil, it's such a lovely old place! To-morrow I must take you to see it. You will so like it. I do want to show it to you.'

'To-morrow I expect I shall be given over to business and my respected uncle. Why not take me there to-night, Maud? It's as light as day, now that the moon is up. It isn't far, is it?'

'Only a mile by the footpath through the park—two by the road. Oh, it would be lovely to go to-night! It would look splendid by this light;' and Maud clasped her hands round his arm closely. 'But I don't know if Aunt Celia would let me go.'

Tor shrugged his shoulders, and laughed carelessly.

'We won't trouble to consult her as to our movements. Run and get your hat, Maud. I'll settle Aunt Celia when we get back.'

With a delightful sense of independence, not to say defiance, Maud ran off to do his bidding.

'My dear boy,' said little Mrs. Lorraine, when her niece was gone, 'you must be careful with your sister. She is very high-spirited, and a very little encouragement would make her rebel against all authority; and your uncle and aunt are not used to being opposed.'

'So it would appear,' answered Tor. 'It is an experience they have yet to learn; and so far as I am able to judge, it will do them a world of good to find they cannot have everything their own way.'

'Well, Philip dear, I dare say you are quite right. People do get sadly overbearing when there is nobody to oppose them; though I must not say anything against your uncle, for he has been very kind to me.'

'Kind!' ejaculated Tor. 'A queer sort of kindness, by all accounts.'

'And family quarrels are sad things, dear boy, at best, and often lead to much mischief, which nothing can cure.'

'I will be cautious. I will do nothing rash,' answered Tor, his thoughts wandering to the Phil whose duties he had assumed. He saw at once the danger of starting a quarrel, which he might be able to sustain with success, but which might involve his more gentle-spirited friend in much difficulty when he assumed the reins of government. 'I have no love of disputes. You may be sure I shall not embroil myself needlessly.'

Mrs. Lorraine's face put on a look of approval and relief.

'You are a dear boy, Phil. You are like a tower of strength amongst us.'

Maud now came tripping back, begging Phil to make haste and escape with her, because she fancied some of her cousins were coming in search of them. Three minutes later they were beyond the precincts of Thornton House; they had crossed the narrow lane that divided the two properties, and had plunged into the deep shadows of the wooded park which surrounded Ladywell Manor.

'Now, Phil,' cried Maud triumphantly, 'you are standing on your own ground—your very own! What does it feel like to be a landed proprietor?'

'Makes one feel a foot and a half taller, at the least! What a lovely night for a walk, Maud—the moonlight and the shadows and the dew upon the grass! I don't remember the Manor a bit, Maud. Were we often there as children?'

'No, hardly ever. We used to play in the park sometimes, but I don't know that we ever went to the house when we were little. Since we have been grown up, we have been sometimes to call on old Uncle Maynard—I and my cousins, I mean. I dare say you never were there at all.'

'No? Well, I certainly don't remember it. But old Maynard must have been very proud of the place. I hear he has stipulated that not less than a thousand a year is to be spent in keeping up the establishment in the way in which he kept it up. I suppose he was afraid that my roving habits would be too strong for me, and induce me to shut up the house and leave it to decay. Any way, he has provided

against any such intention by his will; and whether or not I live there, the gardens and the house will be kept up in style, horses in the stables and servants about the place. You, Maud, as lady of the Manor, will reap the advantage of the arrangement.'

Tor had been informed by his uncle, at dessert, of this proviso in the will, and he had been much relieved to hear of it. It lessened the uncomfortable sense of responsibility which haunted him at times, when the disposal of Phil's property was under discussion, and made his way plain in many ways.

Walking in the moonlight, with Maud for his companion, was a very pleasant occupation for Tor. He felt a very warm admiration for Phil's pretty, lively sister; and her affection towards himself was certainly most agreeable, none the less so from its being unmerited. So far as Maud was concerned, Tor enjoyed the situation vastly. He liked being made the recipient of sisterly confidences, and he felt that during the first struggle for emancipation, which would have to be fought before she quite escaped from the sway of her uncle and aunt, he would make a far better cham-

pion in her defence than would the real brother.

So they walked on together in the moonlight, laughing and chattering, until they suddenly emerged from the shelter of the trees, and saw the great house before them, its many large mullioned windows gleaming in the soft radiance of the full moon.

It was a handsome red-brick structure, with a wide terrace running round three sides of it. The fourth, where the servants' offices lay, was shut off from view by a high wall, now overgrown with glossy ivy, which completely surrounded all the back premises.

The gardens were laid out with great care, and a little later on would be a blaze of colour. The lawns were like velvet, and were shaded by magnificent trees—cedars, yews and graceful conifera. Everything about the place indicated the utmost care, and art had aided nature in making all around particularly beautiful. The house stood well, and the lie of the land around it was peculiarly picturesque. Nothing there was new or raw-looking. The red-brick walls were draped with graceful creepers; the wide terrace and shallow stone steps showed, with-

out any trace of decay, that hundreds of years had passed over them. The look of the trees and shrubs, and the air of the whole place, indicated a calm and solemn antiquity.

'Isn't it lovely?' said Maud softly. 'Isn't it a lovely place to have for one's own?'

'Very,' assented Tor, feeling, though only by proxy, a certain pride of possession. 'There are never such places as this out of England. Can we go into the house?'

'Oh yes—let us. We must go round to the front. This way, by the terrace. See, isn't it an imposing frontage?'

It certainly was imposing. A wide carriage-drive made a bold sweep round to the house, passing beneath the terrace, which, on this side, was adorned by statues and an ornamental stone balustrade, whilst two wide flights of steps, one at either extremity, led down from the terrace to the drive.

'What a lovely road for riding, to say nothing of the turf! Oh, Phil, do you think we shall ever ride together? Shall you be able to keep saddle-horses? Uncle Belassis never would let us ride; but I do so love it: and I know how to, because I have stayed

sometimes with Roma, and ridden with her. It would be splendid to ride here with you.'

'You shall ride to your heart's content,' answered Tor, laughing; 'so will I, when I have got a horse that will carry me. Is this the bell? How astonished the household will be at such untimely visitors.'

The door was opened by a footman in sombre livery, and an ancient-looking butler stood in the background, gazing inquisitively at his visitors.

'I have brought Mr. Debenham here, Walters,' said Maud, advancing into the dim, vast hall. 'We have walked across the park to see the house by moonlight.'

Tor spoke pleasantly to the old servant, and followed his sister into the fine old rooms which were for the present, at least, to be his headquarters. They looked dim and vast in the uncertain light, the shadows very black, and the colours indistinct and ghostly. They could get no adequate light to see the place then, nor did they wish. They were content to rove about the great moonlit rooms, which were not so dark but that they could see how rich were the decorations, and how costly and

magnificent was every fitting, picture, or article of furniture.

It was but a cursory visit they paid that night, yet Tor came away with the impression that Phil had come into a very fine property, and that his house was almost worthy the name of a palace.

They walked back quickly through the shadowy park, whilst Maud described to him the beauty of parts he had not seen: the hot-houses, and the great conservatory, and the stable premises, where it was said half a hundred horses had been stabled in olden times, when there was need.

'If we should not make ourselves too late, she said, 'we would go round by the Lady's Well, down in a hollow of the park there. It is so pretty, all overgrown with moss and ferns; and the dell is a sweet place. It is a magic well, you know; and if we go at the right time we can have a magic wish. Some day I'll take you there, and we will have our wishes—though, now that you've come back, there doesn't seem anything left to wish for.'

She slipped her arm within his, and turned her bright face up to him.

'Kiss me, Phil! You're not a bit demonstrative; I suppose men aren't—*real* men, who aren't namby-pamby like Lewis; but you've not kissed me once, except before them all, when you first came. Kiss me now, in the wood here. I feel as if I should like to hug you!'

Tor, however, evaded any hugging. He bent his head and kissed her quietly, and with a smile that seemed to make up for any more open demonstration; then, feeling the position a little difficult, he hurried her home. Maud's kisses he found dangerously sweet. He had not realized how sweet they might be. He was not an impressionable man; not what is commonly called a 'woman's man,' and it had never occurred to him that he might be seriously bewitched by Phil's sister.

It was ten o'clock when the two culprits entered the drawing-room, and found the company looking decidedly bored. They had expected Tor to amuse them during the evening, and had felt aggrieved by his disappearance.

'We have been across to see Ladywell by

moonlight,' said Tor. 'It looks quite romantic in that aspect.'

'You might have let me come too. I love a moonlight walk,' cried Bertha. 'You're always so selfish, Maud.'

'Phil isn't your brother,' returned Maud. 'I had ever so many things to say to him.'

'Well, I think he might have stayed with us the first evening,' said Matilda, with languid raillery. 'Are we such a dreadfully unendurable family, Phil, that you cannot put up with us for one evening?'

'It is the fashion now, I believe, for young men to do exactly as they please, without any regard for the wishes of others or the exigencies of society,' remarked Mrs. Belassis incisively.

Tor laughed; for anyone to laugh after such a remark showed a boldness, not to say a recklessness, which was enough to provoke a shudder of horror.

'I am afraid my social education has been sadly neglected, my dear aunt, and that ignorance, not fashion, prompted this breach of manners. When a man has been knocking about the world for ten years, with nothing

but his own fancy to please, he grows sadly benighted as to the "exigencies of society." I am afraid I was ignorant that it possessed any.'

'Ah, indeed! Then you will find yourself in many very unpleasant predicaments before many days are past.'

'If I can extricate myself as easily as in the present instance, I do not think I need feel appalled,' answered Tor, taking a seat between his two cousins. 'Surely I have not sinned past forgiveness? I think I can see signs of relenting already. Shall we seal the peace by making a plan? Shall we all lunch at Ladywell Manor the day after to-morrow? Will you all be my guests, and help at the housewarming? and afterwards we can explore the grounds together at our leisure.'

The cousins brightened up wonderfully at this suggestion. Tor made himself exceedingly agreeable and entertaining during the remainder of the evening; and by the time the ladies retired to their rooms, they were loud in his praises—Mrs. Belassis alone excepted.

'Philip, my lad, I just want to speak a single word to you to-night,' said Mr. Belassis,

when he found himself alone with his supposed nephew.

'Certainly, sir; what is it?'

'It is in reference to dear Maud,' answered Mr. Belassis, struggling to appear quite at ease, when really not at all comfortable. 'Are you aware that your father, in opposition to my wishes, made a very extraordinary condition as to the money which Maud has to inherit?'

'I have not heard exactly what it was—though I have my suspicions,' answered Tor coldly.

'It was a very odd will. I advised him repeatedly against it; but he would have it so. He was very fond of my Lewis. He was bent upon the match. He only leaves one-third of the money to Maud, unless she marries my son. I could not persuade him to act otherwise.'

Tor's lip curled slightly.

'Very magnanimous of you, sir.'

'No, no; only just, my boy; only just. Lewis has no claim to the money.'

'Not the least in the world.'

'Exactly; but he will have two-thirds, that is £10,000, if Maud, when she attains her

majority, declines to marry him. He is ready enough to fulfil his share of the contract. He is devoted to her.'

Tor felt as though he should much like to kick the devoted Lewis.

'Well, sir, what is your object in opening this subject to-night ?'

'Because, my dear Philip, I can see at a glance that you will obtain great influence over your sister ; and I am most anxious that your influence should be so exercised as to lead her to make a wise and right choice when the time comes.'

Tor looked anything but pleasant as this suggestion was thrust upon him.

'My sister must make her own choice,' he answered coldly, conscious that he would feel distinctly annoyed if she elected to marry Lewis Belassis.

'Of course, Philip, of course ; the dear girl must be guided by her own feelings : but most likely she will come to you for counsel and advice, when she knows how the matter stands. All I ask you is this—remember how much is involved in all this ; remember her interest is to do her father's will, and use your influence

to make her act so that she will not forfeit her fortune.'

Tor took a few paces backwards and forwards in the room.

'When will she be told ?'

'Very soon now ; any time, indeed. You will be a true brother to her, Philip ?'

'Certainly,' answered Tor, rather haughtily.

'And you will counsel her to accept my son ?'

'That depends upon circumstances. I can promise nothing. I have yet to learn what manner of man your son is.'

CHAPTER VI.

A MORNING WALK.

THOR awoke next morning to a variety of new sensations. This personation of his friend, which had seemed a simple thing enough at the first and at a distance, looked a far more difficult and complicated matter now that he was well launched upon the adventure. He did not shrink from the exigencies of the position: he had no idea of abandoning the game, nor did he as yet regret the daring resolution he had taken; but he was quite alive to the difficulties before him, and was perfectly aware that great caution and calmness were needful for the successful development of his design.

'I am glad I came. If Phil should be ill long, it would have given that rascal Belassis opportunity to tyrannize still more over those

two poor women, and perhaps bully Maud into a marriage with his precious son.' At this point Tor's brow contracted, and his face grew stern. 'I will not have her bullied. She is a very sweet girl, and she shall not be forced into a distasteful marriage for anyone. There is nothing more improbable than that she cares two straws for that affected jackanapes of a cousin; she has far too much sense and spirit. Yes, it certainly is high time that some one came over to look into things, and to put a spoke into old Belassis' wheel. He may have managed matters very cleverly, but I have strong suspicions that he has feathered his nest pretty well at the expense of the Debenhams. I'm not a man of business myself, but I hope I'm not a fool: and though I know nothing of the law, I suppose I can find a man who does. Honest lawyers may be scarce, but I imagine they are to be found. Yes, Uncle Belassis, we will soon see how we stand together, you and I; and if my suspicions verify themselves——' Tor paused and laughed a little to himself at the picture his fancy drew, after which his face grew grave, and he continued his soliloquy meditatively. 'I flatter myself

I shall manage this business better than the true heir. Phil would let old Belassis lead him by the nose far too readily. He will find me a tougher subject to deal with than his own nephew; only I must be cautious, and not launch poor Phil into a family feud needlessly, for that would be sorely against his peaceable tastes. I expect there will be a row in time, but meantime I must keep the peace as far as possible. It is that Mrs. Belassis who is most hostile. She seems as ready for the fray as I am; but there must be no recklessness on my part. I must not show my hand too soon. At present I have no hand to show. My duty just now seems to be to make myself very agreeable to everyone.'

With that amiable resolution in his mind, Tor completed his toilet and descended leisurely. It was still early, and the morning gloriously bright and fine. The door into the garden stood wide open, and Tor strolled willingly into the sunny world without.

Next moment Maud was running to meet him, as fresh and sweet, in her simple white dress, as the flowers she held in her hand.

'Phil, dear old Phil!' she cried, standing on tip-toe to kiss him. 'It is so good to have you here. How nice you do look! I am so glad you are tall and handsome and not a bit like anybody else. I can't bear *pretty*-looking men, with little neat moustaches, and glossy hair, and dapper clothes. I like them to look like men—just as you do.'

Tor laughed, and drew her hand within his arm. He looked down into the bright face, with its tender, gracious curves and loving fearless eyes, and felt that it was a face which was good to look at and good to love.

'I think I must return the compliment, little sister, and tell you that I like to see you look just as you do.'

'Do you?' she cried gaily. 'How nice of you! Because, you know, I am not really pretty—I wish I were, but I know I'm not. My nose turns up just a very little (Matilda calls it a snub, but it isn't so bad as that), and my mouth is too straight, and my chin rather square, don't you think?' feeling it critically. 'But if you like me as I am, I don't care a bit; and when I have pretty dresses—for I do know how to dress, I think—then I flatter my-

self that I have a sort of *je ne sais quoi* expression which is very nice.'

Tor looked down at her with an amused look in his great grey eyes.

'Well, Maud, you shall have as many *je ne sais quoi* expressions as ever you please now, if those and new dresses are identical. The mistress of Ladywell Manor must certainly "walk in silk attire and siller have to spare." Well, little sister?'

For Maud clasped his arm tight, and made a little bound into the air.

'Oh, it is so lovely to hear you talk! Everybody here is so stingy and prosaic. It is like walking into a nice novel.'

The *tête-à-tête* was interrupted at this moment by the arrival of Lewis upon the scene.

'Good-morning, Maud. Good-morning, Phil. What a lovely day it is!'

Tor assented readily, casting a keen, quick glance at his cousin, who was perhaps to be Maud's husband before very long. This thought he found unpleasant; but he was not unjust, and he did not on that account feel any acute dislike towards Lewis. On the

contrary, he entered into amicable conversation, and the half-hour before breakfast slipped rapidly away.

Tor began to wake to the consciousness that he was a very popular man in his new surroundings. At the conclusion of the repast he found that Matilda and Bertha had attached themselves to him, and had evidently no intention of allowing him to make a second escape. These nominal cousins of his did not specially attract him, but he was willing for the moment to drift with the current and to make himself agreeable to all, so he submitted gracefully to their attentions; and as he found they intended to remain his companions for some time, he proposed walking over to Ladywell and arranging for the luncheon-party there on the following day.

This scheme was gladly acceded to, and the plan carried into execution. Lewis led the way with Maud, and Tor followed with the other ladies.

Matilda was full of a gracious interest in all that concerned her companion. For awhile she had laid aside her laziness, and was sprightly and playful.

'We so much hope that you are going to settle amongst us, Phil,' she said. 'We have all set our hearts on seeing Ladywell Manor opened at last, as such houses should be—a centre for hospitality and merry-making. It would be such an advantage to the whole neighbourhood, and would make a popular man of you at once.'

'Phil will be a popular man whatever he does,' put in Bertha glibly. 'There, Phil, I don't often pay compliments, so you ought to feel flattered.'

Tor bowed; but there was no time to put in a word.

'You have not said a word yet as to your intentions,' continued Matilda. 'You are keeping us all on tenter-hooks. We are all in dreadful fear that you will keep to your wandering life, and your *fidus Achates*, and leave poor Ladywell desolate, and the whole neighbourhood lamenting at your departure. Do be a good boy, and say you will settle down and live amongst us.'

'It is rather early days to settle upon one's course of action,' answered Tor; 'but Ladywell shall certainly not be left desolate.'

'Oh well, I know that the house and place have to be kept up, to a certain extent; but I don't call that anything. What's the good to anyone of a splendid house and lovely gardens if nobody lives there? It's no more good than a ruin.'

'Ah! but somebody will be living there now.'

'Oh, then you are going to stay! I am glad!' cried Matilda. 'How you do like to tantalize us!' she added, looking up archly.

'I believe he's only chaffing now,' added Bertha doubtfully. 'I believe he means the servants. Do let him have his say out without interrupting so often.'

'I was thinking of Maud,' answered Tor. 'Of course she will live there now. She will be mistress of my house, whether I am there or not.'

Both faces fell visibly. They had failed to realize that Maud would live at Ladywell as mistress there, and the idea was anything but palatable. They were not fond of their bright, pretty cousin, whose cleverness and sweet temper often threw their attractions sadly into the shade.

'Maud!' cried Matilda almost scornfully. 'Maud the mistress of Ladywell! Oh, poor Phil! you will have an odd *ménage!*'

'How so?' asked Tor quietly.

'Why, Maud is a child—a mere baby in all household matters. She knows nothing and cares nothing for such things. She will make a sad mess of your affairs, if you entrust them to her, Phil.'

He laughed carelessly.

'Oh, as for that, Maud need not trouble her head over domestic details. I dare say there is a housekeeper to see to all that; if not, we can get one. Maud can receive company, and ride with me, and drive round to call on our friends, and give dinners and dances, and all the hospitalities of which you spoke just now. Her part will be to dress elegantly and reign as lady of the Manor. She need not be bothered with housekeeping.'

Matilda and Bertha looked still more blank; and the latter said, with a short laugh:

'Oh, Phil, what an idea! I suppose Maud has been trying to get all the nonsense out of her head into yours. Such an arrangement

would be too absurd. She hasn't the least bit of dignity or experience.'

'Well, as she is my sister, I don't see how any other arrangement is possible,' said Tor, with inward amusement at the obvious jealousy of the cousins.

'You will find her very capricious and wilful,' said Matilda. 'Mamma has always had great trouble with her. She is a nice child enough, but quite unsuited to such a position.'

'Not more so than I am, at any rate. We shall have to learn our duties together.'

'You! Oh, it is quite different with you,' answered Matilda. 'Anyone can see that you were just made for such a position.'

'Nobody ever saw it before,' answered Tor good-humouredly. 'Well, well! Maud and I and Aunt Olive must jog along as best we can, and come to you for advice when we are in difficulties.'

'Aunt Olive! Is she going to live with you?' cried Bertha.

'Yes; Maud will want a chaperon and a companion when I am away. Aunt Olive has kindly consented to fill that office.'

'What a great many plans you have made already!' remarked Bertha sharply. 'Maud has lost no time.'

'Those plans were pretty well made before I reached England,' answered Tor coolly. 'Do you not think them excellent?'

Matilda had recovered her smiles, and answered readily:

'Oh, delightful; only you know they will so soon have to be changed again.'

'Why so?'

'I mean when Maud marries.'

'She is not even engaged as yet, is she?'

'Oh, well, I don't know what you call engaged, but she and Lewis know quite well that when she is twenty-four she will marry him. She has not actually said as much yet, because she has not been told all about it; but Lewis has been in love for years, and she is very fond of him, and of course everybody knows how it will end.'

'And then,' added Bertha, 'you will lose Maud, and be left lamenting all alone.'

Matilda gave a little conscious laugh.

'At any rate he need not be alone long, unless he chooses.'

'Aunt Olive might consent to stay on,' acquiesced Tor gravely.

The sisters laughed, and Bertha said boldly:

'Matilda meant that you might get married, but I don't believe you'd ever be so silly.'

'You look upon matrimony as a snare and a delusion, do you?' he asked.

'I don't know that I ever considered the subject particularly; but I know if I were a man, and had led the kind of life you have done, I should be precious careful how I gave up my liberty.'

'I should have thought,' said Matilda softly, 'that after such a life, a man would feel a great pleasure in settling down in his own home and surrounding himself by family ties. What is your idea, Phil? You ought to be the best judge.'

Tor was thinking of Maud and Lewis, who were on together ahead, and he had not quite caught the drift of the question.

'I beg your pardon. Were you asking if I intended to get married?'

The girls coloured, and made no very distinct response.

'That entirely depends,' went on Tor com-

posedly, 'upon whether the right woman appears. At my age, I don't imagine a man often falls in love simply with a pretty face—at least, he is a fool if he does. He looks for character and mind and compatibility of temper.'

He spoke so gravely that his companions felt half pleased and half fearful. As nobody had as yet fallen in love with either of them for their pretty faces, it was something of a relief to hear their cousin speak so dispassionately of good looks. But then came the crucial question, would their respective characters, minds, and tempers pass muster here?

'He never would care for Bertha,' thought Matilda; 'she is so flighty and sarcastic and bold. I don't think I need be afraid of *her*.'

Whilst Bertha said to herself:

'He never could admire Matilda; she is so fat and lazy, and never has two ideas in her head. I'm sure nobody need fear her as a rival. Phil is sure to like spirit and dash.'

And both girls thought with strange unanimity:

'What a good thing Maud is his sister!

What a splendid thing it would be to be the mistress of Ladywell Manor !'

Tor was perfectly aware that both his companions were wishful to marry him; but the fact that such was the case did not awake any vanity within him. It hardly could do so, since he knew equally well, that this desire on their part had nothing whatever to do with his personal attractions, but had been in their minds long before he ever appeared upon the scene. In fact, it was not upon himself that their young affections were set, but upon the owner of Ladywell Manor. He was only the owner *pro tem.*, and would soon be succeeded by another, to whom he must hand over the property, together with the hearts of the two fair aspirants for marriage with the heir.

Tor smiled to himself as this idea crossed his mind. He was more amused than displeased by the calculations of his companions, for he had outlived his years of youthful romance, and understood very well the practical value of money. Most likely these girls had learnt the same lesson, and in a harder school. Was it wonderful that they should

think as they did, or struggle after a good marriage? Most women in their circumstances would have done the same.

Whilst Tor and his companions were indulging in the foregoing conversation and meditation, Maud and Lewis were not silent on their part.

Maud was willing to let Matilda and Bertha enjoy Phil's society without molestation. She felt so rich in the possession of such a brother, that she could afford to be generous.

She was in gay spirits, and chatted away to Lewis as fast as her tongue could wag. She told him of the golden future before her; how she was to be queen of Phil's splendid house, to have servants and carriages and horses at her disposal, beautiful dresses to wear, and no wish, as it seemed to her, left ungratified. She was so well used to chatter her thoughts to Lewis, that her flow of language never failed, and his silence passed unheeded.

Lewis was not very clever nor very amusing, nor did he possess any of Maud's favourite qualities or characteristics; but then he was very good-natured, and never disagreeable or jealous, like his sisters. Then he always did

as she told him, and was always ready to be her escort, to change her books at the library, turn over her music when she played, water the plants in her garden-border, and, in fact, make himself useful to her in any capacity she wished. Maud had, therefore, a strong cousinly affection for Lewis, not unmixed with a little feminine contempt for one so entirely and unquestionably obedient.

Latterly she had been annoyed from time to time by comments made upon her treatment of Lewis. He had always been something of a butt for playful raillery, with no spice of malice, and he always took her jokes in good part; but Mrs. Belassis had of late chosen to make mysterious and cutting remarks, which her daughters had echoed; and Maud had wondered why it should be so, and had resented the implied rebukes without understanding them.

This morning, however, she was in no mood to resent anything, and talked gaily for a long while, until at last she paused, more for lack of breath than of ideas.

'Well, Lewis, you look as solemn as an owl, and almost as stupid. Can't you say how glad you are at my good fortune?'

'I can say it, of course; but I shouldn't mean it.'

'Not mean it, you disagreeable boy! What do you mean by that?'

'Do you suppose I shall be glad when you leave Thornton House? Is it likely?'

'Oh, you can come and see me at Ladywell whenever you like,' explained Maud graciously. 'I shall always be so pleased to see you.'

Lewis grunted, not seeming as grateful as he ought for this general invitation.

'Don't be cross, Lewis,' said Maud, coming down from her high horse and speaking naturally. 'You ought to be glad at anything so nice coming to me.'

'Well,' said Lewis slowly, 'I did hope something nice would come to you, some change which would make your life more pleasant; but not in this way—this makes it more difficult.'

'What *do* you mean, Lewis?'

'Can't you guess, Maud? *I* wanted to be the one to make a new home for you. I believe you'd have come gladly to it from my father's house; whether you will from Ladywell, is another matter.'

Maud lifted her great eyes to his, full of surprise and vexation.

'Don't be silly, Lewis. Don't spoil everything. We have always been such friends. If you are stupid, we cannot be friends any more, and it will be your fault.'

'Is it stupid to love you, Maud?'

'It is stupid to tell me so, when I don't want to think about such things.'

'But, Maud, you will soon have to think about them, whether you like or not.'

'What do you mean, Lewis?'

'I mean that when you are twenty-four you will be of age, and you will then——'

'I shall then be rich,' laughed Maud, interrupting him gaily. 'Is that why you want to marry me?'

'You will not be rich, unless you fulfil a condition your father made in his will.'

'Oh, I forgot. I did hear there was a condition. Do you know what it is, Lewis?'

'Yes, Maud. The condition is that you marry me. If you refuse, you only get five thousand pounds, and I get the rest. He was so anxious about it that he made a will, as I have said.'

'Marry you!' Maud's face had flushed crimson. 'Why, Lewis, when papa died, I was six and you were nine. How could he want us to marry?'

'He looked to the future, I suppose. I have known this some time, Maud; but I loved you before I knew. I think it was a very unjust condition to make; but I cannot help that. Only do help to cancel the injustice; do think of your dead father's wishes, and think a little of my love.'

Maud was silent, and her face was grave.

'You like me, don't you, Maud?'

'Oh yes, Lewis; I like you very much.'

'Do you think it would be quite impossible to love me?'

'I can't fancy ever caring for you in that way,' was the candid answer.

'But you will think about it?—you will try?'

'I shall think about it, I am sure; but it all seems so odd—it isn't fair. I ought to have my mother's money, as Phil did not get it. You have no right to it.'

'Not the least,' Lewis admitted frankly; 'but I did not make the will.'

'No; Uncle Belassis did that, I suppose,' said the girl rather bitterly.

Lewis did not contradict her; he only said:

'You value your fortune, Maud?'

'Of course I do. I am not a baby, and I am not silly. I don't want to be dependent on Phil, though he is so generous. I ought to be independent and have my rights.'

'Then take them, Maud,' pleaded Lewis earnestly; 'take them, and take me too.'

'I must think about it,' answered Maud, with the petulance of a bewildered mind. 'Don't talk to me any more. I must think about it all;' and, in her own mind, she added, 'I must talk to Phil.'

It was rather a silent party that walked back from Ladywell to Thornton House.

CHAPTER VII.

MICHAEL MEREDITH.

THREE days had now passed since Tor's arrival at his uncle's house, and a good deal of business and pleasure had been compressed into that brief period.

The master of Ladywell was winning golden opinions from all around him. Mr. Belassis had found him pleasant and easy to deal with in a business capacity, and there had been no awkward questions asked during the examination of the papers and accounts relating to the Ladywell property. True, his nephew declined the generous offer he made of relieving him of all the business and trouble in the management of the estate, and elected to keep all in his own inexperienced hands; but then, as Mr. Belassis said to his wife, 'There was

nothing in that; no implied distrust. Most men would prefer to manage their own property, though it's a thousand pities he does not go abroad again and leave everything to me.'

'If he went abroad a hundred times,' Mrs. Belassis answered, 'he would never leave anything to you.'

'What makes you say that, my dear?' asked Mr. Belassis, who had a high opinion of his wife's shrewdness.

'I say it because I know it is true. He has never forgiven you for banishing him to Germany, and for refusing his absurd request to become a musician or an artist, or something ridiculous and disreputable. I found all that out before he had been an hour in the house; and, mark my word for it, he will make things disagreeable for us if he can.'

Mr. Belassis looked uneasy.

'You don't suppose he suspects anything?'

'I dare say he suspects any number of things; but at present it is impossible that he should *know* a single one. It is your business to make sure that he never does know.'

Mr. Belassis mopped his face in his handkerchief.

'If Maud will consent to marry Lewis, things are pretty safe to go smoothly, and no questions will be asked. But if she refuses, and matters come to be looked into——' He paused, and again had recourse to his handkerchief. His red face had grown a shade paler. His wife looked at him rather contemptuously.

'I always told you you were a fool to speculate with that money; and if you are clumsy now, you will be a greater fool still. If Maud declines Lewis, you must have five thousand ready to hand over—now don't look like that; you know it will be the only way. Only——' and here came a meaning pause—'we must take care amongst us that she does not refuse Lewis.'

'I don't know what more we can do than we have done,' answered the husband. 'I never do let grass grow under my feet. The very first night he came, I tried to enlist Philip's sympathy on our side, and in his sister's cause; but he has not given me any answer yet.'

'I wish you would speak to me before you do these things,' said Mrs. Belassis coldly.

'You always make blunders when you act alone.'

'What blunder can I have made in that?' he asked blankly.

'You should never have appealed to Philip at all. He is your enemy, whether you know it or not. You may trust him to oppose any scheme of yours.'

Mrs. Belassis, it will be seen, had not fallen in any way under the fascinations of the supposed Phil; and so certain was she in her own mind of his enmity to his uncle and herself, that she looked with cold and amused contempt upon her daughters' very evident desires to entrap him into a flirtation.

Maud and her two cousins were having a halcyon time under Tor's quiet generalship, which always carried the day. Whatever plan he proposed, he invariably contrived to bring to pass, and he seemed bent on giving pleasure to everyone about him. A wonderful box had arrived from London the previous evening, which contained all manner of articles and fabrics most delightful to the female mind; and although Maud had received the lion's share, Matilda and Bertha were so

generously remembered that there was no room for jealousy in their minds. In fact, just at present, they were more inclined to be jealous of one another, and to make much of Maud. Phil's affection for his sister was evident, and policy certainly urged them both to make a friend of her.

Maud, however, was unconscious of any of the schemes and plots fermenting round her. She was so happy in her brother's return that all other feelings sank into insignificance. Even the talk she had had with Lewis a few days ago, had not made the impression upon her that it would have done some time since, and she had put the subject on one side for the moment as a matter of minor importance.

'Phil,' she said one evening, as they strolled about the garden in the softened light, 'I really think I must take you to see Mr. Meredith to-night. I promised I would soon, and you have been here four whole days. Let us go now.'

'Is it not rather late to pay a call?'

'Oh, times and seasons are all the same to him, poor man! He is blind, you know.'

'Yes, I remember he was mentioned more

than once in that last batch of letters I had. But I don't think you ever named him before in your letters, Maud, and I have not an idea who he is.'

'He is a sculptor—at least he was before he went blind; and he was a great friend of papa's once. He has lived a good deal abroad, and only came here when he lost his sight. He has been here about four years now, I think; but it is only lately that I have got to know them well. He is a widower, and has one daughter, who is a great friend of mine. She is twenty-five, and her name is Roma; she is so beautiful, and she is a sculptor too, and *so* clever. She and her father are wrapped up in one another. Roma has never been quite the same, they say, since he lost his sight. It is a dreadful grief to her, I know.'

'How did he lose it?' asked Tor.

They were walking along a smooth green lane now, which was a short cut to a picturesque house, nestling in a wooded hollow, which Maud pointed out as the home of the blind man and his daughter.

'I do not know—I think no one knows but

Roma and he. They never speak of it to anyone. It happened when they were in Italy—before he came to England to live. I think she feels it almost more than he does; and since then they have quite settled down, and she has been working with her whole soul to complete the works he began, and to earn fame for his sake. She is so clever and so beautiful, Phil, I am sure you will admire her.'

They had reached the house by this time, and its picturesque beauty did not decrease upon a near approach. It was a charming house without and within, and the exquisite harmony and grace which everywhere prevailed, betokened the artist's eye and the cultivated taste of the *connoisseur*.

'Let us go straight in,' said Maud, entering the hall unhesitatingly. 'Mr. Meredith will be in this room. He is always pleased to see me. Come in, Phil. He wants to make your acquaintance, I know.'

Maud opened the door of a small room, hung with rare paintings, and full of beautiful objects of art, and led her brother in.

An old man, with a magnificent head and

flowing white hair, was reclining in an easy-chair under the open window, from whence the light streamed with picturesque intensity upon him. His dress was a black velvet gown lined with crimson, which attire gave to him a marked resemblance to the conventional picture of a mediæval wizard.

'Welcome, my dear Maud,' said the old man in low even tones, as the door opened. 'I heard your step outside the door, and I heard your sweet voice too. So I know you do not come alone. Who is your companion to-day ?'

'Guess!' cried Maud, with her rippling laugh. 'Guess, Mr. Meredith! It is somebody that I know you want to see.'

The old man's face changed and quivered with emotion. He rose from his seat, and held out both his hands.

'It is Philip Debenham's boy come back at last—my oldest friend's only son. Come here, my lad, and take an old man's blessing. For your dead father's sacred memory, I bid you welcome here.'

Tor felt unpleasantly like an impostor as he grasped the hands of the blind old man, but

he betrayed no hesitation either in word or manner.

'I am very glad to see you, sir. It is very pleasant to be so warmly welcomed by almost unknown friends and relations, after eighteen years of banishment.'

The old man's face fell suddenly.

'That is not a Debenham voice,' he said, and he sat down with a sigh.

Maud laughed, and gave Tor a merry glance from her blue eyes. Then she sat down at the old man's feet, and stroked one of the long white hands.

'Now, Uncle Michael, don't be tiresome!' she began in her winning way. When most wishful to please him, she always called him 'Uncle Michael.' 'If you go off into a melancholy fit just because Phil's voice is not like papa's, he will be afraid to come and see you again. You know the Debenhams are never very brave;' and she gave Tor another laughing look.

Michael Meredith smiled, and sighed with gentle resignation.

'Ah, child, you do not understand these things; you are too young to comprehend the

tender, lingering memories of the past—the yearning for some living link of association with bygone days. You have been one such living link, my sweet Maud. I hoped in Philip to find another. Come here, boy. Kneel down before me here; let me pass my hand across your face. Perhaps I shall find traces there of your father, my friend, whom I so dearly loved.'

Tor did his bidding readily, with the same consciousness of humbug that he had before experienced; but this time the comical side of the situation was uppermost in his mind.

The blind man felt his face carefully, passing his hands repeatedly over the boldly cut features; but his own face assumed an expression of disappointment.

'Not a Debenham face either,' he said, with a sigh. 'You are only a Debenham in name, boy.'

Tor smiled as he rose to his feet, thinking how much nearer than he knew, was the blind man to his mark. Maud laughed brightly.

'Phil has struck out quite a new line for himself; and I am glad of it,' she said gaily. 'I like him to be different from everybody else.'

'Ah, yes! you are a child—you are a child,' returned Michael Meredith, with a gentle sigh. 'You do not understand these things. But let that pass—let that pass. It is, after all, only an old man's fancy. Come and sit beside me, Philip. Tell me of yourself, your travels, and of my beloved Italy. You must be familiar enough with that, I imagine. Who does not love Italy?'

Tor was at his ease now, and in his element. He could talk well and fluently of what he had seen and what he had done in distant lands. His tales were not as marvellous and thrilling as those of many travellers; his rovings had not extended, for the most part, beyond the regions of civilization, but he had had adventures enough and to spare, and experiences of every description, and he could tell a story graphically and well.

Maud listened delightedly for a long while, but when the talk turned upon Italy and Italian art and society, her attention waned somewhat, and presently she slipped quietly from the room. She made her way under an arched doorway, and down a long flagged passage, which led to some building inde-

pendent of the house, and only connected with it by this passage. At the end was a red-baize door, which opened noiselessly into a great bare room lighted from the roof, which, as could be seen at a glance, was a sculptor's studio.

There was only one living occupant to this large silent place, and that was a girl, who was so intent at work over a group in terra cotta, that she had not heard the quiet entrance of her visitor.

Roma Meredith was very handsome, with a dark, majestic, southern beauty, which she had inherited from her Italian mother. She had magnificent dark eyes, and masses of hair of an intense blue-black, and her figure was tall and perfectly proportioned, and her proud still features were faultless as those of a Grecian statue.

'Roma!' cried Maud softly. 'Roma, I have brought Phil to see your father. He is such a sweet darling boy! You must come and see him.'

Roma looked up at the sound of Maud's voice, and a faint smile awoke in her eyes; but it died away again as the sentence proceeded.

'I am busy, Maud. You know that daylight-time is precious.'

'Bother your old statues, Roma! You must come and see Phil. He *is* so handsome, and such an angel-boy!'

Roma smiled, but only to please Maud. She was fond of the bright-faced impulsive girl; but it was to very few that the young artist extended her friendship.

'I am glad he pleases you. Long-delayed meetings do not always turn out so well.'

'He is perfect!' Maud cried ecstatically. 'Oh, Roma, we are going to live at Ladywell almost directly, and Aunt Olive too. Won't it be lovely to escape from that dreadful Aunt Celia! Things are a little better now Phil is here, for he won't let anyone bully me, and nobody tries; but it will be splendid to escape altogether, and to be mistress of a big house, and to have nobody to order me about. You must come often to see me, Roma; we will have delightful times there!'

Everything was *couleur de rose* to Maud now, and she was delighted to pour out her soul to her friend. Roma put down her tools and sat down to listen, her quiet face express-

ing a certain amount of sympathy, but no excitement. Maud thought her almost more grave than usual.

'But you must come and see him yourself, Roma!' cried the girl, suddenly jumping up. 'It is almost time we were going, so you must come. I'm sure Uncle Michael would want you to see him. He is amusing him so nicely with his stories.'

Tor had already risen to go, had promised to repeat his visit soon, and was looking about for Maud, when the door opened, and she came in, with Roma following.

'My daughter, Philip,' said the old man, detecting at once the well-known, quiet tread. 'You must be friends.'

They shook hands, and exchanged a few sentences, and then the guests took their departure.

'Isn't she lovely?' asked Maud, the moment they were out of earshot. 'Roma, I mean; isn't she perfectly beautiful?'

'She is very handsome, and she has splendid eyes, and a beautifully modulated voice; but is she not very haughty?'

'Well, perhaps she is. I thought she

seemed so to-day. Perhaps it is her way with strangers: she goes out so very little. Don't you admire her very much ?'

'Yes, I admire her beauty; but it isn't the style I care for most, Maud. She is just the woman Ph—Tor would rave about. That dark Italian beauty is more to his taste than mine.'

'Is it ? He must have good taste. I wanted you to admire Roma, Phil.'

'So I do, little sister, and so I will; but I must be allowed to admire you more !'

Maud laughed archly.

'You bad boy ! Yes, of course you may do that. How could you help it ?'

When the father and daughter were alone together, there was a long silence between them. Roma stood behind his chair, gently smoothing his white locks with caressing fingers. The old man's face was full of thought and purpose.

'Roma,' he said at length, 'that is the man who is to be your husband.'

'Yes, father,' she answered, in calm, even tones.

Her dark eyes seemed to flash fire, and

then the light died out and left behind a melancholy dimness; but that the blind man could not see.

'You are willing it should be so, my daughter?'

'Yes, father.'

The voice betrayed no shadow of reluctance.

'It has been my cherished scheme for years—even when he was a friendless outcast. I would for some reasons he were still poor and friendless, so that my wealth might enrich him. But now I shall see you reigning as queen at Ladywell Manor.'

Roma's face grew cold and haughty, yet her voice was gentle—even playful.

'Perhaps he may have other views himself, father. I am not the only woman in the world.'

The blind man shook his head with a gentle smile of certainty. He had all the quiet egotism of a nature wrapped up in itself—of a man whose will had never been crossed, because he had never mingled with his fellows.

'No, Roma. I have read his nature already. I can bend him to my will. But it will not be needed, I think. He has seen you. He will

see you again. That will be enough. Roma, you must do your part. I shall expect it of you.'

'Yes, father.'

He put up his hand and took hers caressingly.

'You are quite heart-whole, my child? You have never loved any man except your old father?'

Her eyes softened with unspeakable tenderness.

'Never, father—never, never!' she answered passionately; 'and I do not think I ever shall.'

He smiled like a man well pleased.

'Oh yes, you will, my little Roma. You will love your husband, and make him a good wife, as my daughter should do. You will love him when you are married, Roma. Love should come after marriage, not before, if it is to last.'

CHAPTER VIII.

A TALK IN THE TWILIGHT.

AT last Maud's cherished dream was realized, and she found herself at Ladywell Manor, reigning there supreme, with only gentle Aunt Olive for guide and companion.

The beautiful house, with its great rooms and wide corridors, seemed like a palace to her; and the luxury and costliness of her surroundings were delightful, after the somewhat sordid treatment she had received at Thornton House.

Such a brother and such a nephew had never, surely, existed before; of this fact Maud and her aunt were from the first quite convinced; and they grew more and more certain of it, when they found, each day, fresh proofs of his generosity and care.

Tor, it must be confessed, spent Phil's money somewhat lavishly; but, all the same, it was not reckless or thoughtless expenditure. During the ten years that the two friends had travelled together, it had pleased Phil to keep a rough estimate of the amount he owed Tor, so that when his fortune was made (by the finding of gold or diamonds, by some enormous legacy, or some marvellous stroke of fortune), he should know how much he must pay back to his friend.

Tor had listened with good-humoured amusement to Phil's dreams, though he never for a moment supposed that any one of them would be realized. To satisfy this fancy, however, he always promised that, if ever wealth did come, he would consent to be paid back in full; and Phil from time to time solemnly handed over an I O U for large sums, which there seemed no likelihood of his ever being able to repay.

Tor thus possessed Phil's notes of hand for several thousand pounds, and, on the strength of this, he felt entitled to spend money pretty freely upon the household and upon Phil's sister and aunt. As for his own modest wants,

he supplied those from his own funds, as he had no wish to line his pockets at Phil's expense; but he lavished upon Maud everything he thought she could fancy, and liked nothing so well as the sight of her face when it kindled with pleasure and surprised delight.

He was conscious of a dangerous fascination in Maud's innocent confidences and caresses. He played his part of a kindly, undemonstrative, elder brother very creditably; but he was conscious at times that he did not feel very brother-like, and that, on the whole, he was glad he was not her brother; also, that it behoved him to act with care and deliberation.

He came to the conclusion that it would not do for him to settle down at Ladywell, as people expected him to do. Such constant intercourse with Maud would be dangerous; and besides, he had no right to the position he occupied; and he did not wish, when the time for elucidation should come, to find himself in a more awkward position than was absolutely necessary. Until he had known Maud, he had fancied that as soon as the real Phil came to claim his inheritance, he should

just vanish from the scene, directly his friend's rights were made secure; and he had said to himself that what people said or thought of him would be a matter of no moment. Now, however, this opinion was changed. Tor considered that it would matter a good deal what *somebody* thought of his conduct, and therefore he regulated it with great caution and discretion.

He established Maud and her aunt as joint mistresses of the household, with unlimited control over every department. For himself, he said, he was utterly ignorant of English life and ways, and it was useless to appeal to him. He could not settle down all in a moment. He must have liberty to come and go at will; and although, when at the Manor, he took the foot of the table, and was nominal master in all things, he was as often absent as present, slept as much at the Ladywell Arms as at his own house, did much travelling backwards and forwards, and was only master, in reality, of the business matters of the estate.

It was necessary for him to be about the place for a month or two, he told himself, to keep an eye upon Belassis, and to see Maud

over the difficulty of her majority. When that matter was finally settled, he could feel at liberty to do as he thought best. It was much to be hoped that Phil would by that time have recovered, and could appear to claim his own. Until he did so, it was evident that frequent visits would be necessary, just to see that the uncle kept his place, and his fingers out of other people's pies.

Maud would be twenty-four in six weeks' time, and would be called upon to make her decision as to her future. True, the property could not be divided until a few months more had passed ; but the question as to the marriage must then be practically settled. Tor had few serious apprehensions that she really would marry her cousin ; yet he could not feel altogether easy in his mind.

When a good opportunity presented itself, he opened the subject to Mrs. Lorraine. He had an idea that the quiet little widow could give him information upon a good many subjects, if he could induce her to speak out.

It was a lovely evening, early in June. Tor had been too busy looking after the farm-work to come in to dinner. When he strolled

into the drawing-room, about nine o'clock, he found Aunt Olive there alone, sitting still in the soft twilight, her eyes fixed dreamily upon the saffron glow in the western sky.

'Dear boy, have you had something to eat?' she exclaimed, as he appeared. 'It cannot be good for you to be so irregular with your meals.'

Tor laughed in his pleasant fashion.

'My dear aunt, I have done excellently for myself, and my digestion has learnt to accommodate itself to circumstances, as a good traveller's should. What glorious weather we are having! Where is Maud?'

'Gone for a stroll with Lewis. He dined here to-night. She did not know you would be in, or I am sure she would have stayed.'

'Lewis comes here pretty often, does he not?'

'Yes—rather. You do not object; do you, Philip?'

'I? Oh no. Why should I? He's not a bad fellow, so far as I know.'

Aunt Olive drew her chair a little closer, and looked as if she had something on her mind.

'I thought I might venture to make him welcome to your house, dear Philip, because you see—I knew how much—I mean, I am sure that you are very fond of dear Maud.'

'Do his visits please Maud very much?' and Tor's face grew grave. 'Is that what you mean, Aunt Olive?'

'Well, I hardly know whether they do or do not yet,' answered the widow; 'but of course we should all be glad to see her take pleasure in his society—at least I suppose we ought;' and here Aunt Olive paused and shook her head. 'Sometimes I am afraid that—perhaps I am not as forgiving as I should be.'

Tor smiled a little at this ingenuous avowal.

'You mean, I imagine, that a marriage between Maud and Lewis would not be quite to your taste?'

Aunt Olive looked round nervously, as though she fancied some one might be prying about.

'You need not be afraid, aunt,' said Tor; 'you are in my house, not in my uncle's.'

She gave a nervous smile, and then a sigh of relief.

'I am afraid I am a sad coward; but living all those years in his house would have taken anyone's courage away, I think. We were always afraid to speak out, Maud and I.'

'You can speak out now. I am most anxious that you should speak out.' Tor rose, and began pacing the room slowly in the dim uncertain light. 'Aunt Olive, I can see that you feel that this marriage ought never to take place. Is it not so?'

'But Philip, dear boy, I did not say so. How can you know? And Lewis is a very harmless young man, I think. Do you think badly of him?'

'Personally, I know no harm of him; but he is a Belassis.'

Mrs. Lorraine shook her head and sighed.

'Think how much depends upon the marriage. Ten thousand pounds, more or less, for Maud.'

'It was a most unjust will,' began Tor hotly; 'iniquitous, I should have called it, had it not been her father's.'

'And yours, Philip; your dear father's will,' put in Aunt Olive gently. 'Poor, poor Philip!'

'Why did he make such an extraordinary condition?' questioned Tor. 'What could have induced him to take such a step? What was Lewis Belassis to him? I cannot conceive how such a scheme could ever enter his head.'

'Can you not?' said Mrs. Lorraine. 'I should have thought you could have seen.'

Tor drew near, and sat down once more beside her.

'You mean it was under pressure he made it? You think Belassis compelled him?'

'How can I tell, Phil? Alfred Belassis did possess an extraordinary influence over him; but then your uncle declares that the will was against his wishes.'

Tor snapped his fingers contemptuously.

'That for his word! Aunt Olive, let us be open with one another. We both have Maud's welfare at heart, and we both distrust Belassis down to the ground. Yes, you do, my dear aunt; and you cannot conceal the fact from me. Shake off the paralyzing influence that residence in his house has thrown over you. Tell me frankly what you know, and what you suspect. Let us band together against a

common foe, and let justice at last find out its lawful prey. Alfred Belassis is a scoundrel—you know that as well as I do—better, perhaps—and I mean to bring him to book before I have done with him.'

Tor spoke with quiet significance. Mrs. Lorraine put her handkerchief to her eyes, and gave one or two short gasps, almost like sobs.

'Oh, my dear boy,' she said, with a little hysterical laugh, 'it is such a comfort to hear somebody talk like that—to feel that there is somebody to stand up against him at last. He has made so many lives miserable. He hardened my father's heart against my dear husband, and he ruined us, and ruined your poor father. Oh, he is a bad, bad man, Philip; and I have begged and prayed that something might come to put a stop to his evil ways.'

'Well, I have come, you see,' said Tor encouragingly. 'And if I cannot stop them, I hope at least to expose them, which often comes pretty much to the same thing.'

Tor's cool matter-of-fact tone quieted the widow's agitation, as he meant it should.

'Now, Aunt Olive,' he said, after a pause, 'do not be afraid, and do not be excited. Let us talk this matter quietly over, and let me hear what you know of this precious relative of ours.'

Thus called upon, Aunt Olive showed symptoms of the old nervousness, which Tor checked by asking a simple question.

'Did you know my father well, Aunt Olive?'

'Yes, yes—very well. Maud (that is your mother, Philip) and I were deeply attached; it was Celia who never seemed like one of us. We loved each other dearly, and always lived in close companionship. Your father was like a brother to me. My first years of widowhood were spent in his house—you were a child, Phil, but I dare say you remember so much.'

Tor bent his head.

'I do not remember my childhood very clearly. I was at school the last two years of my father's lifetime; but of course I know the circumstances.'

'Your mother had died a few years back. I kept his house for him afterwards. I knew in that way, much of what went on, and of how much he was troubled.'

'How was he troubled? By Belassis?'

'It was money troubles—heavy losses. I don't understand business, nor did he, but your uncle did. Your uncle managed his affairs for him, and never lost his own money; but your poor father was for ever losing his property—I never did understand how it was.'

'Foul play, I suspect,' said Tor quietly. 'I am no business man myself, unfortunately; still, one knows that such things are done. But when my father died, he left me absolutely nothing. Was he aware that all his property had gone, that he left me quite dependent upon my uncle?'

'No, I am sure he did not know that,' answered Mrs. Lorraine quickly. 'I know he believed there was almost as much for you as for Maud. He was a wealthy man, your father; and heavy as had been his losses, he still believed he left you amply provided for. I was thunderstruck when the news came that there was nothing left out of all the property. I have never been able to understand it.'

Tor's face was stern.

'This is worse than I expected; and after eighteen years it would be difficult, I suppose,

to institute an inquiry. I must think about it. Who were the executors under my father's will?'

'Your uncle and aunt; and Alfred was guardian and sole trustee for you and Maud. Oh yes, one can well see under whose influence it was that that will had been made.'

'How was it my father was so much under Belassis' influence?'

Mrs. Lorraine shook her head mournfully.

'That I never could quite comprehend; but your father was a weak and timid man, Philip, more of a dreamer than anything else; and after he lost his wife, he leaned more and more upon anyone who would give him advice and take trouble off his hands. He was friendly with your uncle for a long while. I do not think he suspected him readily; but his confidence was shaken at last, I know. He feared, and I think he hated him before he died.'

Tor pulled thoughtfully at his moustache.

'Things should have been looked into at the time of my father's death. You did not think of consulting a lawyer, and telling him your suspicions?'

A tremor of fear seized Aunt Olive's frame at the bare thought of such a thing.

'Dear boy, how could I? I knew nothing —your uncle is a lawyer, and a much-respected man. Oh, I could not have done such a thing! It would have been dreadful. Can you not see for yourself that it would have done harm, not good?'

'Perhaps. I am not learned in the law, thank goodness! I understand common-sense and plain justice, but not law. I should like to have my uncle to deal with in South America. We could have managed the business quietly and easily there.'

Mrs. Lorraine shivered a little.

'Dear boy, don't say such dreadful things.'

Tor laughed, and his face relaxed. He mused awhile, and then asked:

'Did my father ever speak to you about his will?'

'Yes; but he never said much.'

'Was the will made before or after he had begun to distrust and dislike Belassis?'

'After; and I think when the will was made they were worse friends than ever.'

'Then it stands to reason that the will was not made according to his real wishes.'

'I have always thought that,' and the widow sighed; 'but what can be done now?'

'Will you tell me, if you can, what he said to you on the subject?'

Aunt Olive reflected awhile.

'I know he said that I should be surprised when the terms of the will were made known; but that I should understand better by-and-by, and he thought in the end that I should approve. I can't quite remember the words, but I know they were to that effect.'

Tor pondered awhile over this communication.

'Lewis was a mere child then; he could not have had any love for him. He could not have told that he would not turn out as big a scamp as his father.'

'No, he never liked Lewis. He used to call him a "little snivelling, mean-spirited cad." He was not a nice boy at all, if you remember. He is very much improved on what he was.'

'Very likely; but he has not much to boast of. He is an awful muff.'

Aunt Olive shook her head in her gentle reflective fashion.

'When we think from whom he would inherit his character, can we regret that he has none?'

'I think you are more cutting than you know, Aunt Olive,' said Tor, laughing. 'But now, one question more, for I want all the light I can get. Did my father ever express himself as uneasy about that will? Did he never seem haunted by a sense of its injustice? Did it never seem to trouble him?'

'No, never,' answered Aunt Olive. 'I used to wonder afterwards that it had not done so.' She paused, hesitated, made one or two beginnings, and finally said in a very low voice, 'Phil, if I tell you something, will you promise not to be rash?—it is only a suspicion—a groundless one, most likely. You must not think too seriously about it.'

'I will not abuse your confidence,' answered Tor reassuringly. 'I know as well as you do that suspicions are not of much value; still I should like to hear yours.'

Mrs. Lorraine leaned forward, and in a voice that was little more than a whisper said:

'I have fancied sometimes that he made a later will, unknown to your uncle, and that that was why the unjust condition he had made about Maud's money did not trouble him.'

Tor started, and his eyes gleamed in the darkness.

'Nothing more likely; but where, then, is that will?'

Aunt Olive shook her head sadly.

'Ah, Phil, that is just the point; where is it? It could not have been deposited with any lawyer, or it would have been forthcoming at the time. He must have kept it, foolish fellow that he was, amongst his private papers; and you know who had the examining of all effects, and into whose hands it would fall. Poor Philip never thought of such things; and even he, I think, would hardly believe that a will once found would be——' and here she came to a dead stop.

'You mean,' said Tor quietly, 'that you think Belassis found the will and destroyed it?'

'What can I think?' questioned Mrs. Lorraine nervously. 'It certainly was not found, and you may be sure your uncle would

have his suspicions and leave no papers unexamined. If it was there, he must have found it; but nothing was ever heard of it.'

'The old scoundrel!' muttered Tor between his teeth.

'I believe he is an old scoundrel,' said Mrs. Lorraine, with more spirit than usual; 'but what can be done? We do not even know that a second will existed at all. If we were able to prove that one was drawn up, we could not prove that your father had not destroyed it himself. You may be quite sure that Alfred Belassis will have taken every precaution. He will not have done any foolish thing that could be proved against him.'

Tor rose and paced the room slowly.

'If this will had existed, would not my father have told you? Would not he have given it into your custody before he died? It seems incredible that he should have left it to the mercy of Belassis.'

'Philip,' said Aunt Olive slowly, 'I believe that is just what your father meant to do. I believe he meant to confide in me at the last. I was timid, and he knew such a secret would be a burden to me if I had to keep it long; but

I am convinced he meant to tell me at his death. But his death came suddenly; it was a stroke, you know, and in a few hours all was over. He could not bear your uncle near him, and though he could not speak, he made it plain that he would not have him in the room. Then he tried—oh, so hard—to tell me something, and he could only stammer and stutter; and he tried to write, but he could not; and then he tried to tell me again, and grew so distressed and agitated that I had to pretend I understood, and that calmed him again. Philip, I am convinced he was trying to tell me of that will. At the time I had no idea of such a thing; but afterwards, when I was calm, when I was not in such distress of mind, and could think the matter over, I became certain it must have been that. But it was too late then. Your uncle has been over all the papers: nothing could have escaped him. Your poor father's writing-table was hacked to pieces; they said it was old, and only fit for firewood. I believe it was to find every paper that was there. I know it had secret drawers; probably in one the will was found. Oh, Phil, it is a scandalous shame! but unless Maud

marries Lewis, her fortune will go to enrich the Belassis family. What is to be done? How ought we to counsel the dear girl for the best?'

'It seems to me,' said Tor slowly, as he paced to and fro in the dusk, 'after what I have heard to-night, that for no reason whatever ought Maud Debenham to marry Lewis Belassis.'

Aunt Olive looked down and sighed. To Tor's ears it sounded like a sigh of approval and satisfaction.

CHAPTER IX.

TORWOOD'S TENANT.

THE little town of Whitbury was considered by its inhabitants to be the pleasantest place in the world.

On this bright June morning it certainly did look very bright and picturesque, with its old-fashioned red-brick houses and its wide, clean main street, upon which all the best shops opened. Most of these stood under an old-fashioned arcade, which was a capital place of resort for the ladies of the place, who could meet there in all weathers to shop or to gossip, and where everybody was quite sure to meet everybody else in the course of a few hours, and to hear all the news of the neighbourhood. Above the arcade, the houses rose more closely together, for the upper stories overhung the lower ones, and the quaint

frontages were adorned by crossway beams of wood let into the brickwork, as well as by odd carved figures, little frail balconies, heavy looking gables and twisted chimneys. Very cheerful and picturesque was the appearance of the High Street of Whitbury, and it might be taken as a good type of the characteristics of its inhabitants, who were for the most part quaint old-fashioned people, and full of cheerful kindliness.

After the region of shops was passed, the street widened gradually, and finally lost itself in a great square, in the centre of which stood a fountain. Opposite to the entrance of the High Street stood the Town Hall, which occupied one side of the square; and to the right was a fine old Gothic church, called by the inhabitants of Whitbury the 'Minster,' and the square was designated Minster Square.

The two remaining sides were taken up by some solid old-fashioned red-brick houses, all of them covered with ivy and roses and clematis; and in these houses dwelt the *élite* of Whitbury—a 'set' who formed a kind of miniature commune, and ruled with undisputed sway over the interests of the place.

Next to the church was the Rectory, in which the clergyman and his wife passed their quiet, useful lives, and were content to be beloved by their flock without seeking popularity or fame in other quarters. The doctors' house came next. Old Mr. Blake and his son divided the practice, and lived happily together under one roof, whilst the children of the younger man grew up around them, and were in the eyes of their grandfather the most remarkable children under the sun.

Mr. Graves, the lawyer and general referee of the place, lived next to the doctor, and a retired sea-captain of good family next to him. But the largest house in the square was one which stood opposite the church, and was surrounded by a large garden, in which it stood, as it were, aloof from its neighbours, in stately superiority.

This house was occupied by Miss Marjory Descarte, second and only surviving daughter of the late Thomas Descarte, Esquire, who had been the most wealthy and respected man in Whitbury so long as he lived, and whose memory was still held in high repute by the whole community of the little town.

The two Miss Descartes had been motherless ever since they could remember, and fatherless for the past ten years. Miss Marjory had always held the reins of government, and when her elder sister had died five years ago, it seemed to make marvellously little difference to the existing order of things, save that Miss Marjory, as she was always called, complained somewhat of the loneliness of her lot. Even this trouble was soon cured, for within a year of her sister's death, she received into her house the son and daughter of a cousin in India, and they had remained with her ever since.

The young man had just taken holy orders, and had been ordained curate to Mr. Longmore, the rector, which arrangement pleased Miss Marjory very well, and delighted Ethel not a little, as it secured to her the constant companionship of her brother.

In the pleasant dining-room of Minster House the three were sitting at breakfast. This room did not overlook the square, it was at the back of the house, and commanded a wide view of undulating country. The ground fell away rapidly behind the house, and after

sloping lawns, broken by terrace-walks and bright flower-beds, there came an almost precipitous fall to the river-bed, and beyond the river low-lying pasture-land dotted with rustic farmsteads, and cornfields, and wooded hills beyond.

Miss Marjory sat behind the urn and read her letters. Ethel and Horace sat opposite each other, and chatted of whatever was uppermost in their minds. Ethel was pretty and fair, not over-wise, easy to please and hard to put out. Horace was as much like his sister as his faultlessly clerical costume would permit. It was one of Ethel's puzzles how her brother got in and out of his waistcoats. She meant to inquire into the matter some day, but had not yet had the courage to do so. She was not the least afraid of Horace, but she did stand in respectful and respectable awe of 'the cloth.'

Miss Marjory's face was by far the best worth studying of the three. It was a shrewd, clever, sharp face, not at all unkindly, yet not a face with whose owner anyone would care to trifle. Her eyes were keen and penetrating; her words came readily, and very much to the

point—rather too much so, some people thought—and she had no hesitation in speaking her mind to anyone.

In stature she was rather under than over medium height ; her figure was trim and active, and she always dressed herself with scrupulous care and excellent taste. She was nearer sixty than fifty, but could ride and drive as well as anyone in the county, and she could work for hours in the garden without fatigue. Her garden and her poultry were her two special hobbies, but she had innumerable interests beyond her own private concerns, both in the small world of Whitbury and in the large world beyond. She was a keen politician and a staunch Tory, and was convinced that if the world went on long at its present pace, it would shortly come to an end, to which goal, indeed, it was rapidly advancing.

Miss Marjory was reading her letters, and by-and-by she said, in her sharp, quick way :

'Bother the man !'

'What man ?' asked Ethel.

'Is anything wrong ?' questioned Horace.

'Everything will be wrong if I am turned out of my house,' said Miss Marjory. 'And,

what's more, I won't go—no, not for anybody.'

'Who wants you to?' questioned Ethel, opening her blue eyes. 'Nobody would dare to turn you out, Cousin Marjory.'

Miss Marjory laughed grimly.

'Landlords and lawyers dare anything; but I'm not going, so there's an end of it.'

'But what has happened?' asked Horace. 'How can you be turned out? I thought you had the house on a long lease.'

'Long leases come to an end in time, child. I did not know mine had so nearly expired. Twenty-eight years gone since we came here—how time flies!'

'And are you going to be turned out?' asked Ethel, with interest. 'Oh, Cousin Marjory, what a shame!'

'I'm not gone yet, and I don't see myself going,' was Miss Marjory's answer, as she nodded her head and looked unutterable things. 'Besides, it has not come to that yet; only it looks like the thin end of the wedge, and I won't have it.'

'What have you heard? Has your landlord written?'

'No; only the agent, Mr. Wetherby, who takes the rent and sees to the repairs. He writes to remind me that the lease has nearly run out, and says that it will be his duty to advise his client that matters have changed a good deal since that lease was drawn up, and that a much higher rental might now be demanded. Now I call that a crying shame. Look at all I have done for the place—why, no one would know it for the same, and then to go and demand more rent! But there is no gratitude or honour left in the world nowadays, I think. Oh yes, child, I know I have plenty of money; I could just as well pay £150 as £100 for my house; but it's the injustice of the thing that angers me. Here I go spending time and money and labour unsparingly to improve the place, and then I am told I must pay a higher rent for it. Oh, it's infamous!'

'Well, perhaps the landlord won't take the agent's advice. Perhaps he will go on in the old way. You don't know yet.'

'Don't I know? Don't I know human nature? In old times things were different, but this generation is all alike. Do you think

he'll go on taking £100 a year when he could get £120 or £150? Not likely! And then this agent wants me to show my hand, and say if I want to stay on—as if I should be such a simpleton as that—and tells me his client may possibly wish to live in the house himself, as though I would turn out of my house for anyone, landlord or no landlord. It is quite disgusting to be treated so, ordered about by a mere boy.'

'Who is a boy?' questioned Horace, as Ethel was too much inclined to laugh to put in a word. 'The agent or the landlord?'

'The landlord, of course; that Wetherby is as old as I am.'

'How do you know he is a boy?'

'How do I know that you are a boy?' snapped Miss Marjory, 'because I have eyes and ears, and am not an idiot. Ears, indeed! one need hardly have had ears to hear that child yell. He was a baby when that lease was drawn up, as cross and crying a brat as ever tired a nurse's patience. His mother died at his birth, and Guy Torwood couldn't bear to live in the house after. My father

took it—we had been friends for years—and we have lived here ever since. The poor man took his child away, and travelled about, trying to forget his trouble. He died eight or ten years later; so, unless the son is dead too, that screaming baby is my landlord. Fancy that! What an odd world we do live in! As if I should turn out of my house for a baby in long-clothes!'

And then Miss Marjory, her explosion of wrath having blown itself off, laughed heartily at the picture her fancy had drawn.

'If you knew his father, and were friends, perhaps he will not behave badly,' suggested Horace.

'Pooh! As though young men ever cared for their father's friends nowadays! All that is quite a thing of the past, quite old-fashioned. He will just do what his agent advises.'

'Write to the agent, and ask him not to say anything,' suggested simple-minded Ethel. 'Tell him what you have spent over the garden, and explain that it wouldn't be fair to raise the rent. I should think he would do as you told him then.'

Horace laughed, and Miss Marjory smiled silently, by which Ethel was made aware that she had said something foolish.

'I know what I shall do,' said Miss Marjory, after a pause. 'I shall demand young Torwood's address, and write direct to him. If he is in England I shall try to see him. I hate middle-men—they always make mischief where they can; and that Wetherby and I never were over and above civil to one another. He has to come over and see about the outside repairs, and I always do get my way in the end; but he owes me a grudge for it, and I know he will do me an ill-turn if he can. I'll have no more dealings with him. I'll go straight to headquarters. I'll have young Torwood's address—Torrington Torwood I believe is his name; his mother was a Torrington—and I'll lay the matter before him. His father was a true gentleman, and his mother a gentlewoman. He has gentle blood in his veins on both sides, and ought to know how to treat a lady. At any rate, I can but try. I'll have nothing to do with Wetherby. If I am to get my own way at all, I must set about things my own

way. I generally find when I do that, I am successful.'

Miss Marjory gathered her papers together and rose from the table, bidding Ethel go and practise her music in the drawing-room for an hour. Horace went off to assist at matins in the Minster, and the aunt retired to her morning-room to write her note. Miss Marjory never let grass grow under her feet. She liked to act as promptly as she planned. In five minutes the letter to the agent was written, demanding Mr. Torrington Torwood's address; and as she folded and addressed it, the writer heaved a sigh of satisfaction.

'There, that is one step taken. I don't mean to go, and I don't mean to pay more rent; and I'll have no dealings with that Wetherby. I'll see young Torwood himself, and put the matter fairly before him. If he's his father's son, he will hear reason.'

Miss Marjory then donned a broad-brimmed garden-hat and made a tour of her domain, visited all the houses, gave orders to her gardener, and pointed out with unerring accuracy of observation anything that was going wrong or that had been carelessly done.

Her poultry next claimed her attention, and were closely inspected; after which the active little gentlewoman returned to the house, and held an interview with her cook in the kitchen; and then, having set her household in order, she put on her outdoor garments, took her letter in her hand, and sallied forth into the sunshine of the Square and the High Street.

'I'll post my letter first,' quoth Miss Marjory, 'and then I'll take Mr. Graves's opinion about the matter. I'm determined not to act through the agent, so if he advises that I should, his advice will come too late. I don't mind hearing different opinions, but I always intend to manage my own affairs my own way.'

So the letter was dropped into the post-box; and then Miss Marjory intercepted her friend the lawyer on the way to his office, and treated him to an animated recital of her wrongs.

Mr. Graves was a suave, kindly old man, with a great liking for Miss Marjory; so he entered with interest into her story, expressing great concern at the idea of her being in any way disturbed, and denouncing any

attempt at turning her out of her house as a 'monstrous iniquity.'

'Oh, you needn't fear that, Mr. Graves, for I shall not go,' answered Miss Marjory, with a derisive laugh. 'Little Torwood was an infant when I last saw him; and, as I said to my young cousins to-day, it isn't likely I am going to turn out of my house for a baby in long-clothes. I've settled what I'm going to do. I will see the young man myself. I don't like Wetherby, and I hate all middle-men. I'll settle the matter with Torrington Torwood himself. I've written now to demand his address.'

'Ah, my dear lady, that would certainly be a pleasanter way of managing matters; but young men do not always care about being troubled with business, and sometimes decline to act except through their agents.'

'Oh, that is all nonsense!' quoth Miss Marjory sharply. 'I mean to see him myself. He cannot say no to an old woman, his father's friend—he is too much of a Torwood, I hope, for that.'

'Ah well, we will hope for the best. But he may not be in England, you know; his father became a great traveller, and the son

may inherit his tastes. What then, my dear madam?'

'Why, then I shall write to him,' answered Miss Marjory, nothing daunted. 'I am determined to deal with him direct.'

'I wish you all success,' said the old man, lifting his hat. 'And if young Torwood does come over in person, let me see him. I should like to make acquaintance, for his father's sake.'

Miss Marjory sped on her way, well-pleased with herself and her decision. She made a few purchases in the shops under the arcade, and exchanged greetings with several friends whom she met there. Miss Marjory's movements were so brisk that it took her but a short while to accomplish her errands; and when at length she consulted the little memorandum she held in her hand, she said half aloud:

'Now I think I've done all my work, so I'll go and talk to Alfred Belassis about that iron bar I want for the greenhouse roof.'

Alfred Belassis lived some way down the High Street, and did an extensive business in ironmongery. He was an honest, upright

tradesman and a good workman; and Miss Marjory had a great deal to say upon the subject of greenhouses, iron girders, and some small repairs about the house, to which he listened with respectful attention.

'And Belassis,' said Miss Marjory, in conclusion, 'I wish you would look in yourself some morning. My lease is nearly out, and before I renew it I should like to make a note of all that wants doing inside and out, and consider how much I ought to do, and what I shall demand of my landlord. I would rather have you with me when I make the tour of inspection.'

'Very good, ma'am,' answered Belassis respectfully; and Miss Marjory said good-morning, and walked home.

She waited with some impatience for an answer to her letter, and she had to wait some time; and then, when the reply came, it was anything but satisfactory.

'Madam,' wrote the agent,

'In reply to yours of the 10th instant, I beg to state that I have never had direct dealings with Mr. Torwood, but have merely

managed his house-letting for him, and have paid the money over to his bankers. I am thus ignorant of his present address; but I have applied to Messrs. Coutts and Co., and enclose their reply.

'I am, madam, your obedient servant,

'J. WETHERBY.'

The enclosed note contained the information that Mr. Torwood was at present in very bad health, and was quite unable to attend to business. He was in Germany, but his actual address was unknown to his bankers. He had, however, entrusted the management of his affairs to Mr. Philip Debenham, whose address was 'Ladywell Manor, Ladywell, Devonshire.' Any business might be referred to him, as he was authorised to act for Mr. Torwood.

'Bother!' said Miss Marjory sharply. 'What business had he to fall ill just as my lease was running out? I don't want his friend; I want him. However, if I can't get what I want, I must take the next best. I shall ask Mr. Debenham to come and see me, if he can, and explain to him how matters stand.'

'Perhaps he won't like to be bothered about Mr. Torwood's affairs,' suggested Ethel. 'Perhaps he won't come.'

'He should not have undertaken to manage them, then,' said Miss Marjory quickly. 'He must abide by his own undertaking.'

'Shall you write to him now? I wonder what he will say? Perhaps he will be easier to deal with than Mr. Torwood.'

'I generally find men pretty easy to deal with,' answered Miss Marjory. 'They mostly see sense after a bit. Yes, I will ask him to run down. Devonshire is a good way off, to be sure. Still, there is no particular hurry. He can take his time. In fact, I won't write immediately. I will think matters over again first.'

CHAPTER X.

MAUD'S MATRIMONIAL VIEWS.

THERE was no doubt that Maud Debenham made a charming mistress of Ladywell Manor. She had a natural grace and freshness, and a spontaneous vivacity that was very attractive; and when Tor, on Phil's behalf, entertained the county, and made the Manor House the centre of much pleasant hospitality, Maud came in for a very large share of admiration; and she had no more devoted admirer than Torrington Torwood—her supposed brother.

For a man to fall in love with the woman who is, in the eyes of the world, his own sister, is a distinctly awkward occurrence, and the situation is as unpleasant as it is peculiar.

That he should become enamoured of Phil's sister was a contingency which had never

seriously presented itself to Tor's mind. As he had lived eight-and-twenty years without having succumbed to any serious extent to the shafts of the blind god, he had, not unnaturally, believed himself proof against all such winged darts; and he was more surprised and disgusted than he could well express at finding into what a mess he had driven himself.

There was no doubt that Maud would soon have lovers enough and to spare, and of course she would make her choice amongst them; how could it be otherwise? And there was Lewis Belassis already in the field, with a powerful bribe at his back, and Maud seemed on the most friendly terms with him. She would be sure to engage herself to some one before long, and Tor would be forced to stand quietly by, dispassionately discussing her choice, and receiving the overtures of hopeful lovers who were anxious to conciliate the brother.

Such a position was all but intolerable; yet so securely had he bound his own hands, that he felt utterly incapable of movement. He dared not cast off the disguise he had adopted.

He dared not throw up the game he had begun to play. All he could do must be to hinder, as far as possible, any matrimonial schemes, until the real Phil was ready to take his place, and allow him, as Tor, to have fair play with the rest. Phil's protracted state of vacuity awoke in his friend's mind very uncharitable feelings, and Tor felt himself a most aggrieved individual.

Maud's caresses and confidences were bittersweet to him, and often nearly shook his determination to keep silence. Her love for him was so genuine and so strong, that he felt persuaded he could win her for his wife if he could but tell her who he was. But he would not burden her with his secret. That must at once raise complications and difficulties which would betray all to the world. He would never ask her to play a part, and destroy the innocent frankness and lightheartedness which gave to her her greatest charm. No; he must keep his own counsel, and guard her as carefully as he could; and meantime he suffered terrible pangs of jealous uneasiness with regard to Lewis Belassis.

Maud and Lewis certainly had ample oppor

tunity for becoming lovers if they were so minded, and Lewis grew more and more bewitched by his pretty cousin, as he saw her reigning in unfettered freedom at Ladywell, far removed from the petty restraints and annoyances that were always disturbing her equanimity at Thornton House.

Maud was as happy as the day was long—so happy that she found it easy to be gracious to all the world, even to Uncle Belassis and Aunt Celia; and to her old friend and playfellow Lewis, she was all that cousin could wish. His silent homage and increased admiration flattered and pleased her (for without being vain or exacting, Maud was not above the delights of feeling her own power), and the knowledge that he was looked upon as a desirable husband for her was not entirely distasteful, although her mind was by no means made up on that subject.

Maud was in no hurry to marry, or even to pledge herself to do so. Her life with her brother was far too pleasant to make her wish for any change. At the same time she was fully aware that her decision as regards Lewis Belassis must eventually be made, and made

at no very distant date, and she was fully alive to the advantages that would be gained by following her father's wishes in regard to her future; in addition to this, she was learning in a pleasant and practical manner the advantages of wealth, and she was insensibly growing less and less inclined to yield up her own fortune into the hands of another.

It had been Tor's wish that she should not be troubled on this point, but allowed to think the matter over by herself, so that neither he nor Aunt Olive had ever alluded to the subject in her presence.

This silence, however, did not quite suit Miss Maud. Her nature was outspoken and frank, and the matter which concerned her and her cousin Lewis did not lie so near to her heart but that she could speak of it readily.

Aunt Olive, after that twilight talk with Tor, had watched with some anxiety the frequent meetings between Maud and Lewis, and was growing uneasy at the apparent pleasure she seemed to take in his society. So she was not sorry when the girl at length opened the subject of her own accord.

Tor was away on business. Lewis had dined at Ladywell, and he and Maud had strolled out afterwards, as they often did. In half an hour the girl returned alone, and stretched herself languidly in a luxurious chair, clasping her hands behind her head. The soft lamplight fell upon her white drapery and dusky hair with picturesque effect, and her aunt could not but think how very fair she looked in her maiden grace and childlike unconsciousness of scrutiny.

'I wish Phil would not go away so often. It is so dull without him.'

'He seems to have a great deal of business to get through. Business must be attended to, you know, my dear.'

'I wish he'd leave it to the bailiff, then,' answered Maud. 'I can't bear him to be away. He's such a dear boy, isn't he, Aunt Olive?'

'He is most kind and good to everyone; a true gentleman, and a true Debenham.'

Maud gave a little soft laugh.

'I thought he was too bold for a Debenham, aunty.'

'Well, my dear, your poor dear father was a

timid, peaceable man; but I think you and your brother have more of your mother in you. Poor Maud was gentle, but she was not timid.'

Maud sat silent and thoughtful. Presently Mrs. Lorraine spoke again.

'Where is Lewis?'

'Gone home,' answered Maud briefly.

'Then he will not be in for tea?'

'No; he has gone home. We had a little quarrel, and Lewis got into a huff. I laughed at him, and told him he was like the old peacock who has lost his tail, and looks so silly when he puts on airs. It seemed to annoy him, I'm sure I don't know why; so he stalked off, looking very dignified and foolish. However, he will soon feel better, and come back as meek as a whipped puppy. I shall be very magnificent when he does.'

And Maud's pretty mouth curved into a mischievous smile.

'I am afraid you are a sad tease, my dear,' said Aunt Olive, gently shaking her head.

'I think Lewis was made to be teased,' answered Maud. She smiled, made a little

moue, and added slowly, 'You see, if I have to marry him by-and-by, he will be able to have his revenge. But I never can picture Lewis my lord and master.'

'I do not think he ever could be that.'

'Well, my husband, then,' said Maud. 'You know, of course, that he is bent on marrying me ?'

'Yes, my dear, everyone knows that ; but I do not think you are bent on marrying him.'

Maud gave a silent laugh.

'Well, no, not exactly ; but then you know, Aunt Olive, it's quite possible that I may.'

'Do you like him very much ?'

'Very fairly well ; sometimes I like him quite a great deal, and sometimes he bores me terribly. When Phil isn't here, I don't mind walking and talking with Lewis ; but I'd never go with him a minute if I could have Phil instead.'

Aunt Olive sighed gently.

'And yet you talk of marrying him !'

'One must marry some one, I suppose,' returned Maud, with a quaint assumption of the air philosophical. 'It would be much the

nicest not to—to let things stay just as they are; but then they won't stay. Changes always do come, generally unpleasant ones; people get old and ugly (except you, Aunt Olive), and often cross, and I should do the same, I suppose; and then I should so hate to be an old maid!'

'Well, my dear, there are many things worse to my mind than being an old maid,' said little Mrs. Lorraine; 'but still, you might avoid that fate without marrying Lewis Belassis.'

'You mean, I suppose,' said Maud reflectively, 'that I might marry somebody else?'

'Yes, my dear; why not? there are plenty of men in the world.'

'Why, so there are, Aunt Olive; but I think there are very few nice ones.'

'Is Lewis so nice, then, as to be your model?'

Maud shook her head; her face was grave now, and she spoke with great apparent seriousness.

'The way in which I look at the matter is this—marriage is a necessary evil, like measles and whooping-cough. One must marry, and

perhaps by-and-by, when one is used to it, one may find it less disagreeable than it looks ; but all that must chiefly depend upon whom one marries. Now, my feeling is that a known evil is much better than an unknown one—by an evil, you see, I mean a husband. As a rule, it seems to me almost impossible for a girl to know much about the man she marries. A good many men have been here lately, and they have been particularly attentive to me. They have all got beautifully brushed hair, charming little moustaches, spotless shirt-fronts, and exceedingly pretty manners ; and they all say exactly the same sort of thing to me, and I say exactly the same sort of thing to them, and we are all as nicely-behaved as people can possibly be. Of course it would be absurd to suppose that we know one another a bit ; but it wouldn't be absurd, I suppose, for one of these model young men to make me an offer of marriage, or for me to accept him. That would be considered quite an ordinary and natural wind-up to an acquaintance of a few weeks. Now listen, Aunt Olive ! Once at a picnic I overheard one of these nice young men swear like a trooper at his servant, because he had

buckled a strap wrong in his horse's harness. I suppose he would soon swear at his wife if he had one. Another young gentleman could not come up again to dance after supper because he was "so awfully screwed." If I married him, perhaps he would soon get "screwed" before my face instead of behind my back. No doubt all the other young men have their nice little habits of speech and manner, which are so very engaging when suddenly discovered; and therefore I think I may well call them unknown evils, when I think of them as husbands. Now with Lewis it is different, for I do know him; I know him almost as well as I know myself. He is not very good-tempered, he is not very good-looking. His hair is not geometrically parted down the back of his head, nor brushed till it shines like a mirror. His clothes do not fit like a glove. He does not always wear a choice flower in his buttonhole. He does not try to imply by his words and looks that life, out of the sunlight of my presence, is little better than a howling wilderness, and then say the same to half the girls he dances with in one evening. But all the same, Lewis would

put himself about a good deal to do anything for me; and when Lewis says a thing he means it. If I married Lewis, he would not abuse me, nor swear at me in private; nor would he get tipsy and humiliate me in public. I know all his good points and his bad ones; I know his moods, and his manner, and his habits. To marry Lewis would not be taking a leap in the dark; and therefore I call him a known evil, and as such, prefer him to the unknown.'

Maud made this long speech with great deliberation; and the comical twinkle which from time to time appeared in her half-closed eyes did not detract from the serious good faith with which she delivered herself of her matrimonial views.

There was a silence after she had spoken, which she herself broke by asking:

'Well, Aunt Olive, have I not expressed myself well? Do you not think I am very wise and prudent for my age?'

'My dear child,' said Aunt Olive, very earnestly and almost tremulously, 'if those are your ideas of marriage, do not marry at all.'

'Why so, Aunt Olive? Why shouldn't I marry?'

'Because, my dear, marriage is the highest, holiest tie that can bind human lives together—a tie of God's making, not of man's, and which must not be lightly or carelessly, or irreverently thought or spoken of. Oh, my dear, dear child,' and here the little widow's composure almost gave way, 'you do not know what you are saying. I think if marriage is not almost perfect happiness—the union of soul with soul—it must be the most miserable state in the world. I could not bear that you should thoughtlessly enter upon it.'

Maud looked earnestly at her aunt, and then rose and crossed the room swiftly and silently. Taking a low footstool at Mrs. Lorraine's feet, she rested her arms upon her knee, whilst the young face, in all its sweet, fresh trustfulness, was turned inquiringly up to the wrinkled one above, which bore upon it the impress of sorrow borne with bravery and resignation, in the strength of a love stronger than death.

'Aunt Olive,' she asked, in the softest, gentlest of tones, 'were you and Uncle Lorraine so happy as that?'

The question was put with too much tender directness to give pain. It was the tears of

sweet, sad memories that filled the widow's eyes.

'Yes, Maud, I think so. As I look back to those few years, there does not seem one cloud to overshadow their happiness—I mean clouds from within. We had troubles to bear from without—none are exempted from those, and ours were heavy ones; but in the sunshine of perfect love, Maud, nothing can be a very great trouble. Oh, my dear, precious child, do not marry without that perfect love, that utter union of heart and soul, without which no marriage can be blessed by God.'

Mrs. Lorraine's face seemed almost to shine. Her gentle timidity had vanished. For a moment she was the stronger woman of the two.

'I have often wondered, Aunt Olive, how it was you married against grandpapa's wishes and everyone's. I think I can understand now.'

'Yes, my dear; love gave me strength of purpose. I had given myself to Arthur, and it was impossible to draw back. They say marriages are made in heaven; and I suppose ours was too, for nothing seemed too great a

sacrifice to make for one another. It was just as if it had been made for us somewhere, and we had only to do our part.'

'Aunt Olive,' said Maud gently, 'was Uncle Lorraine very, very good that you loved him so very much?'

'No, my dear, I will not say that. I do not think he was better, or wiser, or cleverer than many men that we see round us. But then we loved each other. Until you love, you cannot understand what that is; but it just makes all the happiness in life.'

Maud's face expressed much sympathy, yet not an entire acquiescence. She hesitated a little before she asked her next question.

'But—but—I mean, Aunt Olive, it must be heavenly to love like that, if—if—you both love and both live; but suppose—well, you know, Uncle Lorraine died. Many people lose their husbands or wives. It must be so dreadful when that happens. I should so wish I had never loved him or married him, if it was me.'

'No, you would not, my dear,' answered Mrs. Lorraine, not heeding the confusion of construction or faulty grammar, but grasping

the leading idea. 'No, you would not. You would feel then, what we often heard said, about having loved and lost being better than never having loved at all. Nothing can take a great love away; not even death. It must always be a living reality; and, by-and-by, I fully believe, we shall take up the thread just where it seemed to snap, and after that there will be no more parting.'

There was a long silence after these words. Maud had never before heard her aunt speak in such a strain, and she felt half awed by it. These ideas, too, of marriage were new to her —new, at least, as the practical outcome of experience. She had read, of course, plenty of intensely sentimental writing on the subject, but naturally nobody out of their teens believes what poets and novelists say on such a subject. To hear some one speaking like that out of her own experience—one whose life she had looked upon as a sad and colourless existence, and whom she had pitied sincerely for her marriage—to hear Aunt Olive assert that she would not give up this love at any price, that what had seemed the bane, was really the blessing of her life, was startling, to say the

least of it, and somewhat shook Maud's carefully elaborated theories.

'I should like to love like that,' she said. 'I think I *could* love like that, too. But then —I'm almost sure I shall never find the right man.'

Aunt Olive shook her head gently.

'There is no knowing, dear child. Only be true to yourself. Never marry at all, rather than give your hand without your heart.'

'I could fancy falling in love with a man like Phil,' said Maud, following out her own train of thought. 'He is so manly, and so strong, and so gentle, and he just goes his own way, and everything seems to give way to him; and yet he isn't a bit selfish, and he is always thinking of other people, and doing kind things. And he isn't afraid of Uncle Belassis nor of anybody else; and he doesn't talk about himself, nor bother everybody with interminable traveller's tales. And he is big and handsome, and dresses himself properly without being a bit of a dandy; and he has such nice manners, and is always just as polite to you or to me, though we are his relations, as to the fine ladies of the county. Oh yes, I could fancy being

very much in love with a man like Phil; but he's my brother, you see, and there is not likely to be another one anywhere within reach.'

'Well, then, my dear, you had better remain an old maid until a second Phil appears.'

Maud shook her head dubiously.

'I would wait if I could, and never bother myself about it, for I'm very happy as we are; but I can't. I must decide about Lewis. I shall be twenty-four almost directly, and then I shall be expected to make up my mind.'

'You don't love him, Maud; so don't marry him.'

'But I do *like* him, Aunt Olive. Sometimes I like him very much. And then there is papa's will and the money—my money. Aunt Olive, I should so hate to be poor.'

'You will have five thousand in any case, and Phil will never let you be poor.'

'But five thousand is very little, and I don't like to be dependent on Phil always. Besides, I *ought* to have the money—it really is mine. Lewis knows it as well as I do; and papa must have wanted me to marry him very much. Lewis says that Uncle Belassis will give him as much as I have when we marry—that will make

thirty thousand. We could have a very nice house and everything we want in reason then. We are not extravagant in our tastes, either of us, and I think we should manage capitally. Lewis would be very good to live with, I think, Aunt Olive; and I know I could get my own way with him.'

'But—but——'

Maud playfully laid her hand over her aunt's lips.

'Yes, I know, Aunt Olive—I just know what you're going to say; and you know I haven't a bit made up my mind that I will marry Lewis: but I do think that if I did, I should get to love him by-and-by—people do in books often; and though I don't go much by that, I do think that I could get fond of him in time—quite fond of him. I know it seems very horrid to marry for money; but you see it is a little different when it's *my* money, not his—don't you think so? And Lewis does really care for me, because he would get most of the money anyway, and yet he is always worrying me to say that I will take him, and get it all for myself. It's a very unpleasant position to be put in, and I've not made up my mind what

I'll do, nor spoken to Phil about it either. Still, I can't see why I shouldn't marry Lewis if I feel inclined to. After all, there is something in his favour, when he is a *known* evil.'

Maud's mischievous mood had returned to her, and Aunt Olive dropped the subject. She knew her niece's temperament too well to try to oppose her. Opposition to Maud was another name for encouragement, and she did not wish to encourage her in her half-formed determination to marry Lewis Belassis.

CHAPTER XI.

AN ENCOUNTER WITH BELASSIS.

SINCE his nephew's arrival in England, Mr. Belassis had felt anything but at ease. To use a well-worn simile, he felt like one who walks over a powder-mine which may at any time explode, and blow him into the air.

He could hardly have explained the cause of his uneasiness, for he had always been a cautious, not to say a cunning man, and had taken all possible care to gloss over all his doubtful transactions so as to make them appear upright, and even disinterested. Still he could not but be aware that there were certain passages in his past life which would not bear the light of day, and he was especially anxious that these passages should not come under the notice of his nephew.

Why Mr. Belassis should stand in such awe of his nephew is not very easy to say. So far no unpleasantness had occurred between them, and the younger man had given no open sign of distrust or dislike.

Yet, all the same, Mr. Belassis feared him. Tor's cool independence and self-reliance gave him great uneasiness, for he felt by intuition that it would be a very difficult matter to daunt or to deceive him, if ever such a course should become desirable.

Such a character in a Debenham seemed to Mr. Belassis little short of a personal insult. He had always before been able to do what he would with the Debenhams. Even Maud, who had a distinct spirit and character of her own, had never given him any great trouble or anxiety. There was a facile playfulness in her composition, and a distaste of anything unpleasant, which rendered it easy to coax or to command her. She would put up with a good deal rather than make a fuss and get into disgrace ; and he had always felt certain that with care and diplomacy he should be able to get her to do his will in great things as in small, if only she remained an inmate of his house,

and was backed merely by such feeble support as her aunt Olive could give her.

But now that the supposed brother had taken her away to his own house, and would evidently stand between her and any threatened coercion or cajolement—who might possibly use his influence, which was great, against the Belassis interest, then matters began to look serious; and the worthy uncle's brow was often lined by anxious care, as he reviewed the situation and wondered what would be the end of it.

He was so used to find his will and his wife's dominate over all others, that the sensation he was now experiencing made him feel helpless, and almost foolish. Mrs. Belassis, too, took a view of matters which was anything but reassuring; for she was convinced that Phil was their enemy, and that his present quietness and apparent cordiality only formed a mask for a hatred which would openly manifest itself when he had assured himself of the strength of his position.

'Mark my word, Alfred,' she would say sometimes, 'he hates us; and some day he

will make us feel it. What a fool you were to speculate with that trust-money! I always told you it was too risky. You know better than I, where a transaction of that kind is likely to lead you; and I know quite well that Philip Debenham will have no mercy. One can read that in his face.'

Mr. Belassis wiped his forehead with his handkerchief.

'Lewis must marry Maud. We *must* manage that. When her name is Belassis, and her interests ours, then he will have to stay his hand. He will not bring disgrace upon *her* family.'

'When!' repeated Mrs. Belassis sceptically. 'If you marry Maud to Lewis *now*, you will be a cleverer man than I take you for.'

'But—but,' he expostulated, 'why should we not? He is devoted to her, and I think she likes him. A few weeks ago you had no fears.'

'A few weeks ago Maud was under my control. Now she is not. Our influence is at an end. She cares for nobody now but Philip, and he will be our enemy.'

Mr. Belassis cursed his nephew with a hearty

goodwill. In his wife's society he allowed himself the luxury of strong language.

'What possessed the old madman to make that boy his heir? Why couldn't he have left the property to you, or me, or Lewis? What a grand thing it would have been for us! It makes my blood boil to think of such a chance lost. And for him to die just then, before we had made sure of Maud!' here followed more unparliamentary language. 'Oh, it's too much for anybody's temper! What can make Philip so different from his father, and everybody of his name?'

'There is something very odd about Philip, I always have thought,' said Mrs. Belassis significantly.

'What do you mean?'

'I am not sure that I know what I do mean; but I am watching. I have a sort of suspicion, but I can hardly tell yet what it is. If I could, I should say nothing to you—you would be sure to let it out, and spoil everything. If you take my advice, you will have as little to do with him as possible.'

'Well, I don't want to have more to do with him than I need,' answered Belassis, looking

rather foolish and crestfallen as he heard his wife's plainly expressed opinion of him. 'But I do think I know how to take care of my own interests, Celia. You seem to have very little confidence in my caution.'

'In your caution, plenty; but not much in your judgment,' answered his wife frankly.

'Well, I must speak to him about Maud, at any rate. He said he would think the matter over, and make up his mind whether to advance or oppose our views. I wonder if he has decided yet.'

'If you take my advice, you will say nothing at all about it,' said Mrs. Belassis.

The ex-lawyer, however, was not prepared to take his wife's advice in all things. He had a great respect for her cleverness, but he considered his own superior; and he was determined, if possible, to be on friendly terms with his nephew. He hoped still to conciliate him, and win him over to his own interests, and was half inclined to think his wife's prognostications needlessly gloomy.

The Ladywell party had dined one evening at Thornton House, and Lewis had speedily followed the ladies into the drawing-room.

Tor would have accompanied him, and had risen to do so, when Mr. Belassis interposed.

'Sit down again—sit down again, my dear boy. We must excuse Lewis, I suppose; he has a right and reason to prefer the ladies' society: but we so seldom have a chance to talk quietly together, that I confess I am anxious to avail myself of it.'

Tor sat down readily enough, and filled his glass. It was not his way to assume heroics, or to stand aloof even from people he considered undesirable. His manner was always unruffled and serene.

This friendliness of demeanour disarmed Mr. Belassis, and gave him courage.

'Well, Phil, my lad, how do you like the new life, now that you are getting settled down to it? Is it as much to your mind as the old roving style?'

'I hardly know yet. Not quite, I think. I do not feel settled even now. It would take very little to start me off on my travels again.'

Mr. Belassis seemed to breathe more freely.

'Ah well, I can understand that. It is but natural, I suppose. If I were young again,

and had your means and your experience, I don't know but what I should do the same myself. Have you made any plans yet? Have you settled anything definite?'

'Oh no; I never do settle things beforehand. I just do what I like, and go where I will. I detest plans,' was the careless response.

'I suppose Mr. Torwood always did the planning in past days?' suggested Belassis.

'Oh—ah—yes; Mr. Torwood did all that. Of course it was his affair chiefly.'

'I suppose you will join him when you do begin to travel again?' said Belassis, gently feeling his way.

'I dare say. I really haven't made any plans. I don't see my way to getting off yet awhile.'

'No, not quite yet, I suppose. You would like to see dear Maud safely married first?'

Tor made a quick gesture with his hand, and his brow suddenly clouded.

'See Maud married!' he echoed rather sharply. 'Who says she is going to marry?'

'Well, nobody says so yet; but at the same time we cannot be quite blind to what is passing. She seems really fond of Lewis, and

she will reap so substantial an advantage by marrying him, that it is impossible not to rejoice at the prospect. I am sure you must feel as I do upon the point, my dear Philip, and rejoice with me.'

'I don't believe she cares two straws for Lewis,' answered Tor coolly.

'My dear boy, excuse me. I am sure she entertains very warm feelings for him.'

'I think she may like him next best to that mastiff pup I gave her the other day; but I think the dog stands first.'

Mr. Belassis laughed in a rather sickly fashion.

'You are so amusing, Phil; such good company.'

'Glad to hear it, I'm sure. I have to make up for so much lost time with my relations—eighteen years of separation is a good spell.'

Mr. Belassis coughed and fidgeted, and allowed the challenge to pass unanswered.

'To return to what we were saying about dear Maud. She really is fond of Lewis, though I admit she may not be what is called "in love" with him. Still, she has a strong affection for him, and I trust you will use your

influence to lead her to make such a choice as shall be so much to her advantage, as a marriage with Lewis will prove.'

'I don't feel disposed to interfere in the matter one way or another,' answered Tor coldly.

'But think of your sister's future.'

'I do think of it; but I'm man of the world enough to know that money isn't everything. She shall marry according to her own wishes —a man she really cares for; if he is rich, her lack of fortune will matter little; and if he is poor, I shall take care she does not suffer. I have enough for both, and I'll not have her coerced by a question of L.S.D.'

Mr. Belassis' face fell, and he looked sadly crestfallen. Tor seemed lost in thought, and did not heed for awhile the eager words and arguments his companion continued to urge upon him. At last he woke up, and met his interlocutor with a glance in his eye which the latter did not like.

'Now look here, sir,' said Tor: 'you've asked me a question, now let me ask you one. Why are you so very anxious for this marriage?'

'Why am—I anxious—why—I,' stammered

Mr. Belassis, taken aback by the tone rather than by the words. 'You know my motive—it is my interest in Maud's welfare. As her guardian and her uncle, of course I am anxious for her to do well for herself. Besides, I never liked the terms of that will. I thought the condition a most unjust one, and have been very anxious to bring all right. Your father made it entirely against my will—indeed I never knew—or it never should have stood.'

Under Tor's cool, steady gaze, Belassis faltered and stumbled, and strove manifestly for an assurance and ease which he was far from feeling. He wished he had taken his wife's advice, and let his nephew alone.

'Suppose you drop all that,' said Tor quietly. 'I dare say it pays with women and children; but it doesn't do where you have a man to deal with. My father knew, old Maynard knew, and I know as well as you, how and why that will came to be framed as it was. Men in their senses don't rob their daughters to enrich their nephews, or set their hearts upon a match between mere children when nothing in the world depends upon it. My father was not mad, only very weak; and I

have been told, on good authority, that his legal adviser exercised a very strong influence upon him. It is not hard, therefore, to understand how such an iniquitous will came to be framed.'

Mr. Belassis sat mute and cowed under the spell of Tor's cool words and keen eyes; but he dared not be silent too long. It would look like a confession of guilt. He pulled himself together, emptied his glass with rather a shaking hand, and answered with creditable firmness.

'You are quite wrong in your inference, Philip; but I cannot blame you, because you have reason on your side, and you cannot, of course, remember how strange and eccentric a man your father was. Still, I can point out one weak point in your case. That will, which you think was contrary to your father's real wishes, was drawn up fully two years before his death. Do you suppose, if it had not satisfied him on maturer consideration, that he would have allowed it to stand? He had plenty of time to alter the terms, or to make a fresh will, had he so chosen.'

'Exactly so,' answered Tor, 'and I am

strongly of opinion that he did make a later one.'

He was watching Belassis narrowly, and he saw him start and change colour; moreover, it was some seconds before he was able to speak.

'Wh—what a very extraordinary idea! A—another will! Why, where ever is it then? Why was it not produced?'

'I fancy, Mr. Belassis, that you could answer such a question better than I; for it was you, not I, that had the handling of my father's papers on his death.'

Belassis grew livid about the lips.

'Do you mean to accuse me of suppressing a will?' he asked, in a quaking voice.

'I accuse you of nothing, because I know nothing. I am merely informing you of a suspicion of mine, which is, that a later will was made, which has never seen the light. If that will ever fell into your hands, I am convinced it never will see the light now.'

Mr. Belassis sat silent, glaring at his audacious nephew; but he did not fly into a passion or attempt to carry war into the enemy's quarter.

'He knows something about it,' said Tor to himself, 'or he would not tamely submit to be accused of crime. I wonder what he has done with it—destroyed it most likely—certain to do that. I wonder who were the witnesses; but that would prove nothing. Phil's father might have destroyed it himself—there would be no case. What a shame it all is! However, I think I can make that old rascal pretty thoroughly uncomfortable.'

'You do not deny my suspicion, I notice, sir,' he said aloud.

Belassis made a ghastly attempt at a smile, and then assumed an air of dignity strangely at variance with the expression of his face.

'I say nothing, Philip, because I have no wish to quarrel, and because I feel sure when you come to think the matter over, you will be sorry for your words, and be ready to do me justice. Let us forget they were ever spoken. I can forgive them, because I know that they were prompted by a natural, brotherly jealousy for a sister's rights; but they were very ill-advised, Philip, and will, I trust, never be repeated.

'Well,' said Tor rather significantly, 'I do

not imagine much good will come of a repetition, and at present it is certainly useless to discuss such a subject. Shall we return to the question from which we started? I asked you why you are so very anxious for Maud's marriage with your son, seeing that in any case he obtains a large share of her fortune, and that the marriage will only bring him in five thousand more. Maud will cost him more than five thousand. He will be a richer man if he remains single, and might then marry an heiress into the bargain. You know all this as well as I do. Why, therefore, are you so anxious for the match?'

Mr. Belassis' face had been purple before; now it regained its livid tint.

'Young man,' he said sententiously, 'I fear you have been taking too much wine; your tone is becoming most offensive. Why do I wish my son to marry your sister? For the best possible reason: because I love the girl as if she were my own, and wish her to be no loser because of her father's romantic attachment to myself and my family.'

'I think I suggested before, sir, that it would be better to drop all that humbug,' said

Tor blandly. 'I've no doubt you've repeated such sentiments so often to your female relations, that you have grown almost to believe in them yourself. But at the same time you must be quite aware that such protestations are a little out of character, and strike an impartial observer as rather too much of a good thing. You talk of loving Maud like a father. Rather odd how delighted she was at escaping from the paternal roof. She can never congratulate herself enough yet that she is really free for ever from the shadow of Thornton House.'

'Girls are so contrary; never know when they are well off,' growled Belassis.

'I find Maud anything but contrary; however, we will let that pass. I am not going to condemn you simply because Mrs. Lorraine and my sister were so thankful to escape from your care—we all know that women will have their whims. What I want to know is this: why are you so bent upon this marriage? You would rather Maud married and was miserable, than that she should refuse your son—you know perfectly well that it is so. And as so much comes to him in any case, why should you care? What is your motive?'

Mr. Belassis' eyes had grown sullen and sombre. He only vouchsafed a few surly words.

'I have told you the reason, my only reason. I have no motive. What is it to me?'

'That is what I mean to find out,' returned Tor, with cool significance. 'The reason you allege is miserably insufficient. I must try and find out the true one.'

At last Mr. Belassis' rage and fury burst out. Fear was the motive power, as Tor was quick enough to detect.

'You dare insult me like this, Philip Debenham! You dare cast these foul aspersions on my integrity! I, who have been an honoured and trusted friend to your father, and a father to his ungrateful children! How dare you sit there and heap insult upon insult! How dare you look me in the face and utter such words! You viper! you adder! you would sting the hand that has loaded you with benefits! Do you not know what you owe to me? Who was it paid for your education and maintenance for eight long years after your father's death? You owe every-

thing to me—everything. Do you not know that it was to my generosity you owe it that you were not brought up by the parish? Do you not know that your father died a ruined, penniless man?'

'Yes, I know that perfectly,' answered Tor, who sat utterly unmoved by this outbreak. 'What I do not know, and what I want to understand is, how it came about that he did die ruined and penniless. Perhaps you can enlighten me further on that point?'

All the anger faded out of Belassis' face. He looked quite pale and scared, like a man who has received blow upon blow till sense has almost departed.

'He speculated,' came the answer, spoken in a gasp.

'Possibly; but he was a man of quiet, studious mind, utterly averse to business matters. He must have done it by advice. Who managed his affairs for him?'

'Could I help his folly?' questioned Belassis hoarsely; 'I was but his tool, his agent. I bought and sold for him, but it was all his own doing.'

Belassis looked so completely cowed that

Tor was half inclined to pity him. Indignation on Phil's account, however, urged him to speak out.

'Indeed! Well, sir, I am not a business man myself, but it does seem strange to me how completely my father's fortune vanished, whilst yours steadily augmented. As you knew so well how to manage your own affairs, one would naturally suppose you might have saved him from ruin. It looks a little strange, on the face of things, especially considering how little my father knew of the world, and how completely he trusted his affairs to you. I was ten years old, remember, when he died quite old enough to remember a good deal. I do not know yet how the thing is done, one man enriching himself at his neighbour's expense; but of course such transactions are common enough, and I can soon discover a little of the method. Well, I will say good-evening now. I dare say you will have a good deal to think over, so I will not longer disturb your meditations. I hope they will be pleasant and profitable to you.'

Tor rose and quitted the room, without waiting for a reply.

Alfred Belassis had a great deal to say to his wife that night.

'I told you he was our enemy,' she said. 'I told you to let him alone. Well, if he is going to be dangerous to us, I will see if I cannot be dangerous to him too.'

And Mrs. Belassis' face looked venomous enough, as she lost herself in deep thought.

CHAPTER XII.

AN AWKWARD RECOGNITION.

FOR some days after that encounter with Belassis, Tor saw little of the uncle or the uncle's family. He was rather glad of this, because Matilda and Bertha had grown somewhat pressing in their attentions of late, and he neither felt disposed to encourage nor yet to snub them. He liked to take life easily, without disturbing himself or others by needless display of feeling, and he hoped that these two supposed cousins would gradually 'slack off' from their pursuit of himself, without driving him to any definite declaration of indifference.

The Belassis family was, however, reaping distinct social advantage from its close connection with Philip Debenham of Ladywell Manor. Houses which had heretofore been utterly closed

to the 'pettifogging, vulgar attorney,' were thrown open to young Debenham's uncle, and invitations to dinners, dances, and outdoor *fêtes* rained in thick and fast, to the great delight of the Belassis girls.

It was rather a bitter pill for them to swallow, that Maud should take precedence of them in everything—that she should be courted, flattered, brought forward and made much of, whilst little notice was vouchsafed to them. Maud had been kept studiously in the background at Thornton House, had been stinted in every way as to dress, and made to look and feel as insignificant as possible; therefore it was the more provoking for them to see how attractive and winning she appeared, now that she had cast off her chrysalis shell and had emerged as a bright and brilliant butterfly.

Matilda and Bertha found it trying at first to witness Maud's triumphs; but motives of policy taught them to conceal all ill-feeling, and gradually Maud's simple goodwill and generosity towards them took the sting from their jealousy, and brought them to a more reasonable and pleasant frame of mind.

They were in a high state of exultation now,

for they had been at last invited to the great *fête* of the county, Sir William Gainsford's garden-party, followed by a dance—an annual glory from which hitherto they had been excluded, and upon which they had looked very much as the Peri did upon Paradise.

But here they were at last, walking in the beautiful grounds, playing tennis with the *élite* of the county, and tasting all the joys of an increased dignity and self-importance.

Maud and Aunt Olive were there under Phil's escort; but Matilda and Bertha were too well content with their own share of glory to grudge Maud her triumphs. Was not a young baronet now talking as pleasantly to them as if he were an intimate acquaintance? What might not result from festivities like these?'

Mrs. Belassis and her two daughters were gathered together under the shade of a spreading beech-tree, and the youthful Sir Herbert was making himself very agreeable, when a tall figure was seen leisurely approaching, and Bertha said softly:

'Here's Phil.'

Sir Herbert glanced up as the new-comer

approached, and then his face brightened visibly.

'Why, Torwood!' he exclaimed, 'who would have thought of seeing you here, amid all the resources of civilization! I am glad to see you again. Is Debenham here? Are you still partners? I think I did hear the name mentioned; but I never guessed it would be Phil Debenham that I knew in Canada. Is he here?'

Tor looked into the lad's bright face with an amused smile.

'He is here, my dear fellow. He is standing before you.'

Sir Herbert glanced round quickly, and then up into Tor's humorous face.

'You're not Phil Debenham!' he exclaimed.

'Indeed; that's news to me. Who am I, pray, if I'm not myself?'

'Why,' said Sir Herbert slowly, 'I beg your pardon; but I thought you were Torwood, and the other fellow Debenham.'

'Whereas I am Debenham, and the other fellow Torwood,' answered Tor easily.

'No; really though!'

'Why, certainly. Not but what Tor and I have very frequently got mixed in the minds of other people, and I'm afraid we did not bother ourselves always to put them right; still we did not go so far as to confuse our own identity ourselves. All the same, you are not the first person who has been confused.'

'Yes, I certainly thought you were Torwood; however, I'm quite open to conviction. Where is Torwood? Are you still travelling together, or have you divided company at last?'

'I have come over to see about some property I came into a little while back; and Tor is in Germany. He's been rather seedy, poor old fellow! I dare say, as soon as I can get away, we shall go off again somewhere together. Anyway, I shall go over and see about it soon.'

'You must miss one another, I should think. He always seemed to lean upon you for everything,' remarked Sir Herbert.

And then he was carried off by Bertha to play tennis, and Tor was left with Mrs. Belassis and her daughter.

'You know Sir Herbert Moncrieff then, Phil?' said the latter.

'Yes, a little. We met in Canada, and travelled for a week together. I think that was the only time we met. He is rather a nice boy; but I fancy Tor saw more of him than I did.'

'Rather odd, that mistake he made about the name,' remarked Mrs. Belassis incisively.

Tor felt he was being closely watched; but he was not going to be put out by the scrutiny.

'Yes, rather; but he's not the only person who has mixed us up together. We often got taken one for the other; but it didn't matter, and we didn't care. I suppose sisters and intimates do meet with that sort of thing. Aren't you and Bertha mistaken for one another sometimes, Matilda?'

'Oh yes, often. People are very stupid. I should think you and Mr. Torwood must have got muddled up very often. Is Sir Herbert very rich, Phil?'

'I don't know; pretty well off, I should say. You can look him up in the "Landed Gentry" if you want to know about him.'

'Oh, I don't care, I'm sure; he's a mere

boy. I don't think men are at all amusing until they have passed five-and-twenty.'

'And after that they become more fascinating every year,' suggested Tor, with a smile. 'What good taste you have, my fair cousin! I was beginning to fear I was getting to be an old fogy. Now I shall have hopes of myself.'

Matilda laughed and shook her head coquettishly.

'As if you ever thought such a thing! You know quite well what is thought of you all round here. You are only fishing for compliments, you bad boy!'

'Well, compliments are very nice things, especially from the lips of ladies,' answered Tor gallantly.

Matilda blushed and bridled. Mrs. Belassis looked at the two faces, and her keen glance read at once the consciousness and vanity of the one, and the good-humoured indifference of the other. Towards her daughter she felt a contemptuous pity for her conceit and credulity; but none the less did her indignation rise against the man who was practising upon it.

'Philip,' she said, in her rasping tones, 'is it true that you were the leading spirit in your travels with Mr. Torwood, as Sir Herbert seemed to imply? Considering that you were entirely dependent upon him, it seems rather curious that he should depend upon you.'

'Well, my dear aunt, I suppose when two people travel and live together, year after year, they do grow to lean one upon the other to a certain extent. Of course I tried all I could to save Torwood trouble, and he may have come to depend in a certain measure upon me. I do not see anything peculiar in that. I suppose I have the stronger will of the two, and that always tells in the long-run.'

'You had not a strong will as a child,' said Mrs. Belassis shortly.

'Perhaps I was never allowed the use of it,' suggested Tor, smiling.

'Well, you have certainly made up for lost time now,' retorted the lady, beginning to wield her fan, a sure sign that she was put out. 'Your friend no doubt found as much, to his cost.'

'We never quarrelled, anyway.'

'But you always took the lead?'

'I did not say that; but I may have done so to a certain extent.'

'Your letters always gave us to understand quite the contrary. It was always Mr. Torwood who planned and arranged and paid for everything. I always thought that you were a kind of tame dog or valet to him.'

'I am sure you would always think what was kind and flattering,' answered Tor, with a little satirical bow, which greatly annoyed Mrs. Belassis, who was not used to retort.

'You always gave us cause to think what was flattering, did you not?' she asked, with a sneer. 'Running away from your uncle's care the moment the time came for you to earn a living, and repay him for all the benefits heaped upon you—running away to live on the charity of a stranger, who might kick you over at any moment, rather than be independent and do honest work. I wish Mr. Torwood had turned you adrift, just that you might learn what you had lost by your folly and pride.'

'I am always grateful for good wishes,' said Tor pleasantly. 'Have you any more to offer me before I go?'

'I am glad to hear that you are grateful—I should hardly have thought as much from my knowledge of your character. I suppose you consider yourself under obligations to the friend upon whose charity you have lived all these years? Yet now that your prosperity has come, you leave him ill and alone in Germany, whilst you come over to enjoy your inheritance here. Your ideas of gratitude are evidently as original as the rest of your character.'

'Mamma, how can you be so disagreeable to poor Phil!' remonstrated Matilda, with indignation. 'I'm sure he has been as kind and good to everyone, as anyone could be. But, Phil, why don't you ask Mr. Torwood to Ladywell? If he is well enough, he would certainly enjoy the change; and if he is ill, he ought to see an English doctor, I am sure. I don't believe foreign ones are the least good. Why don't you have him over, and get the very best advice to be had for him?'

'I should have said that was the very least you could have done for a friend, to whom you owe so much,' said Mrs. Belassis.

'So I shall do, if this German man fails,' answered Tor. 'That is to say, he shall come

if he will ; but I have every reason to believe he will soon be well, and there will then be no need for further advice.'

'But you will ask him to Ladywell, won't you, when he is well ?'

'Oh yes,' answered Tor, with a rather peculiar smile. 'He shall come over as soon as ever he is well. I think you will like him, Matilda.'

'Is he good-looking ?'

'Yes ; I think so.'

'As good-looking as you, Phil ?' archly.

'Why, yes; decidedly more so, I should say,' answered Tor, smiling. 'I always told him he was quite the lady-killer.'

'If he is so presentable,' remarked Mrs. Belassis ruthlessly, cutting short Matilda's attempt at a flirtation, 'I cannot think why you did not bring him with you.'

'You must remember that he is not a "tame dog." He had not the least wish to come.'

'How odd ! I should have thought he would have liked the fun. Did you ask him ? Did he say he would not ?'

'He did not express the least wish to accompany me, which comes much to the same

thing. I could not urge him, as he was seedy; and it would hardly have been fair to the German doctor, to have taken him away before he had given his system a trial.'

'What is the matter with him?' asked Mrs. Belassis sharply.

'I do not know. He had a fall, and injured himself somewhere. I fancy perhaps it is the spine, for he has to lie on his back a good deal. I must go over and see him soon, for he is an awfully bad correspondent. Well, Matilda, shall we go for a row on the lake there? I shall have much pleasure in sculling you, if you have a fancy for a boat.'

Matilda complied joyfully, delighted to have secured her handsome cousin for her companion; but she found him disappointingly absent and absorbed, though he concealed any appearance of anxiety so successfully, that she had no idea how much disturbance of mind her mother's words had occasioned him.

'She will be dangerous if she can,' thought Tor to himself. 'I don't think she can suspect *yet;* but she is on the high-road to suspicion. I hope to goodness no other fellows we ever came across, will turn up. It would become

distinctly awkward if they *all* greeted me as Torwood. By Jove! I half wish I'd never begun the game. It grows more and more complicated every week. I'd no notion it would be such a bore. However, if I only stop that marriage between Maud and young Belassis, I shan't have had my pains for nothing. Confound that Phil! Why can't he come to his senses and act for himself?'

Mrs. Belassis sat still in deep thought after the pair had left her; and the result of her meditations was expressed in a few words of soliloquy.

'Well, I don't understand things yet, and I haven't got the clue; but I'm quite sure there's *something* very odd about it all.'

Matilda and Bertha were in high spirits as they dressed afresh for the ball that night. They were not staying in the house; but as they came from a distance, they remained during the interval between the two *fêtes*, and a room was allotted to them, which their cousin Maud shared. All three girls had new dresses for the occasion, and therefore, it need hardly be said, were in a high state of delight.

'Oh, Maud, how lovely!' was the exclama-

tion of the sisters, as they turned and beheld the marvellous costume of creamy lace and satin and pearls in which she had just arrayed herself. 'Why, it's perfectly heavenly! Where did you get it? I suppose Phil gave it you?'

'Yes, it came from Paris—Worth, you know. Isn't it nice! He's a dear boy, and gives me lovely things. I almost wish he wouldn't. He is so extravagant over me.'

'It's well to be you, Maud,' said Matilda. 'I wish Lewis was like that; but then, he hasn't any money. Maud, do you think Phil means ever to get married? Does he ever talk of it? Most men do, when they come into a property.'

Maud laughed, and shook her pretty head.

'He doesn't ever talk about it. I don't think he does intend to, yet.'

'I think he ought to,' remarked Matilda judicially. 'A man in his position ought to have a wife. When you are married, Maud, he will have to get one.'

'I am not married yet,' answered Maud, laughing. 'Perhaps he will when I am; but I do not think he will marry you, Matilda.'

This was not spoken with a shade of malice;

only with the frankness of girls brought up together, who had discussed matrimonial projects many times before.

Matilda coloured, but did not seem to take offence.

'He might do worse,' she said. 'I think he likes me. He was particularly nice to-day. Why do you think such a thing so impossible, Maud?'

'I'm almost sure he will never marry a Belassis,' she answered gravely.

'That is all mamma's fault!' cried Matilda angrily; 'she is so rude to poor Phil.'

'I told her it was horribly mean of her,' added Bertha, 'spoiling our chances and everything. Of course she said we were fools ever to think we had any chance. One can never do any good with mamma; she will go her own way.'

'And make Phil hate us all.'

'He doesn't hate you at all,' interposed Maud, 'but he doesn't like Uncle and Aunt Belassis; and I'm sure he wouldn't like to become a son-in-law.'

'It is a shame!' cried Matilda, with something like tears in her eyes.

'Besides,' continued Maud frankly, 'I don't much think he would fall in love with either of you. It would be much more likely to be Roma.'

'Roma Meredith!' cried both sisters at once. 'Why, she never goes anywhere. When does he see her?'

'He goes there very often. Mr. Meredith is fond of him. I think he would like him to marry Roma; and she is so very, very beautiful and clever. I don't see how he can help admiring her. If he does marry at all, I think I should like it to be Roma.'

'She would never have him; she would never leave her father,' objected Matilda, looking rather blank.

'She would do exactly what her father wished. She has no will but his.'

'She would be a horribly dull wife to have,' cried Bertha, with a short laugh. 'She can only stand in statuesque attitudes and look handsome. She never has anything to say for herself.'

'Oh, but she has, when you know her; only she is very shy and reserved.'

'I can't bear people like that,' said Bertha,

pinning in her flowers viciously ; 'I like fun and quickness.'

There was silence for a minute or two ; then Matilda asked suddenly :

'Are you going to marry Lewis, Maud ?'

'I don't know.'

'Haven't you made up your mind yet ?'

'No.'

'You'll have to, pretty soon.'

'Well, yes ; but I haven't done so yet.'

'I call it unfair to Lewis to keep him waiting so long,' said Bertha.

'Papa and mamma will be wild if you don't,' added Matilda. 'I thought you were going to for certain.'

'I did mean to, once ; but I don't feel so sure now,' said Maud coolly.

'I suppose Phil is against it, as poor Lewis is a Belassis,' remarked Matilda.

'Phil has never said one word about it.'

'Then why have you changed ?'

'I don't know, unless because I am so happy at Ladywell, and because all other men seem so stupid and tame after Phil.'

'I believe you want to wait till he brings Mr. Torwood back from Germany,' cried

Matilda, laughing, 'to see if he isn't like Phil, and to go in for him.'

Maud laughed herself at the idea.

'I think I might do worse,' she said. 'If he is one bit like Phil, I should like him fifty times better than Lewis. I will tell him he must bring him to see me soon.'

And then the three girls descended to the ball-room, and enjoyed one of the happiest nights of their lives; the enjoyment being much enhanced by Tor's impartial attentions to them all.

CHAPTER XIII.

ROMA'S REQUEST.

MAUD had spoken nothing but the truth, when she said that the supposed Phil paid frequent visits to the blind sculptor's house. Michael Meredith had grown very fond of the young man who could talk so well and so willingly of Italy and Italian art, who knew his beloved Rome as intimately as he himself, and who would listen to his raptures with perfect patience, and sympathize readily with his love for the beautiful.

Tor liked Michael Meredith. He had a natural taste for oddities; and this handsome, blind enthusiast, with his princely airs and sublimely unconscious egotism, amused and interested him not a little. Society at Ladywell there was none. Even the rector and the

doctor lived a mile or two away. Maud's companionship was too dangerously sweet to be overmuch indulged; therefore Tor was glad enough of some house where he could come and go at will, always welcomed and never in the way. It was a charity to relieve the dull monotony of the blind man's days, and Tor's visits soon grew to be looked upon as regular events.

'It is well,' Michael Meredith would sometimes say to himself—'it is well. Young men do not come day by day, to spend the best of their time with the old and the blind, without a motive other than compassion. What I have wished is coming to pass. I am not the attraction to Philip Debenham—I am not vain enough to suppose that for a moment. Roma is the attraction. It is her he comes to see. And though I cannot see their looks, their voices tell me that her coldness is melting before his quiet devotion, and it is plain he is her warm admirer. All is going well—very well. I shall call Philip Debenham "son" before I die.'

What Meredith said about Roma was certainly true. Her coldness towards her father's guest had insensibly decreased. She could not

continue to treat with an icy indifference, a man who had shown himself so considerate and forbearing towards the father she passionately loved.

Roma was not blinded by her great love. She knew that her father was not a general favourite with the people who knew him. He was an egotist; he was wrapped up in a few ideas, to the exclusion of all else. He could not endure contradiction, and was never open to conviction. Blind prejudices hemmed him in on every side, and caused men generally to quarrel with him first, and to despise him afterwards. He seldom made a friend, hardly ever kept one, yet he never seemed conscious that there was aught amiss with himself. He only gently bewailed the crotchetiness of the world; and wondered how men ever got on there at all, when they were so determined not to hear reason.

His daughter, little as she knew of the world, could see farther than he, and she understood only too well the reason why they lived so very much alone. The consciousness of her father's faults and weaknesses did not diminish one whit the devotion and loyalty of

her faithful heart; rather, she clung to him the more for the failings, which left him so dependent upon her for love, care, and companionship; but at the same time, she could the better appreciate consideration and kindness in others for knowing how much patience was needed in intercourse with her father; and Tor could not but rise in her favour when she saw how regular his visits became, and what great pleasure they always gave.

Had Meredith been wise enough to say nothing to her of a wild and foolish plan which had long been working in his brain, the girl would doubtless have learned to like Tor very much—she might even have loved him; for the cold, proud manner belied the warmth of the feelings below. But the blind man never could conceal anything from his daughter, and he loved the sensation of power which he experienced, whilst calmly mapping out her future, as sure of the fulfilment of his dreams as if he really possessed a prophetic power. He talked himself into absolute confidence, and became actually confused between the real and the imaginary.

So Roma had been told years ago that it was

her fate to marry Philip Debenham, the son of Meredith's first friend and patron; and she had never resisted this verdict, because it seemed useless to dispute the matter, when the future husband was far away in foreign lands, and might never appear upon the scene at all. And when he did come back suddenly, a rich and prosperous man, when her fortune would no longer be needed to restore the prosperity of his house, and when he most likely would be expected to choose a wife from the rich and noble in the land, then Roma did indulge some faint hope that her father would abandon the curious plan he had made. She might have known him better. Money was dross in his eyes. Had Philip come home a beggar instead of a prince, he would have bestowed his daughter's hand upon him with equal readiness. No change of fortune could uproot an idea which had grown, as it were, into the very depths of his nature. Roma had not crossed him at the early stage of affairs, and now she dared not breathe a word of opposition.

Not long since, during a sharp attack of illness caused by a chill, Roma had persuaded

her father to call in medical advice—a thing from which he greatly shrank. The slight illness was soon thrown off; but the doctor had spoken seriously to her of the highly excitable condition of his patient's heart and brain, and had warned her that if his life was to be prolonged, he must be carefully guarded from all excitement or anxiety. That some mischief was going on he did not doubt; but of what kind it was difficult to say, as his patient was suspiciously reserved in answering questions about his health. All that the medical man could do was to warn the girl to avoid all vexatious or exciting topics of conversation, and to keep his mind serene and contented at all risks.

It was now, therefore, quite impossible for Roma to oppose his will even in small matters. To resist him in such a matter as this long-cherished scheme, would be to her nervous and excited fancy to give him his death-blow at once.

When Philip Debenham appeared upon the scene, Roma's feeling towards him was one of intense dislike. She hated the sound of his name and the sight of his face. She could

hardly bear to listen to Maud's raptures over her 'angel-boy,' and she felt degraded by his very presence in the house.

When, however, his visits continued, and she saw more of him, and of his goodness to her father, the strength of her antipathy wore off, and she could not but feel a certain liking for anyone who did not tire of the monotony of the blind man's room. At the same time she never quite lost the sense of constraint, which had been so painful at first, and her manner was always somewhat distant and reserved, even when it had lost its first icy coldness.

Tor, for his part, had no special interest in the handsome Italian-looking girl. He thought her rather absurdly haughty, and needlessly frigid in her manner; but he did not trouble himself about the matter, nor resent that of which he was barely conscious. Michael Meredith was much more interesting to him than Roma, and during his early visits he hardly saw the girl at all.

As he became more at home in the house, however, he grew to know her better, and to feel on a more friendly footing. Not unfre-

quently it was in her great studio that Meredith would be sitting, and then, as he listened to the old man's eager talk, his eye would rest with a certain satisfaction upon the graceful figure of the daughter, and he was not sorry when she too became included in the conversation. Maud had told him that Roma's coldness was only a cloak for a painful shyness, induced by her lonely life; and so the young man, feeling himself immeasurably older and more worldly-wise than this handsome, bashful girl, took some pains to draw her out and put her at her ease; and Meredith listened to his pleasant voice and gentle, brotherly gallantry with a curious smile upon his still face, whilst Roma unbent almost unconsciously before the easy friendliness of Tor's manner. There was not one spice of the lover in any single word or tone to alarm her or put her on the defensive. Tor was far too loyal to Maud ever to wish for even a mild flirtation with Roma. Had he been fancy free, the dark beauty and statuesque grace of the young sculptor might have made an impression upon him; but with Maud's sunny face, mischievous smile and winsome ways always be-

fore his mind's eye, he was proof against other charms, and only offered to her a frank, friendly kindliness which she could not but accept as it was meant.

Maud was delighted to find that he and Roma were friends, and was quite prepared to hear later on that they were something more than that. She had no wish that Phil should marry; but if he must do so, she would like Roma Meredith as a sister-in-law better than anybody else she knew.

Tor walked down one day to the sculptor's house. He was an intimate now, and did not ring the bell, but walked straight to Mr. Meredith's study, as usual. The room was empty, so he naturally concluded that the studio was his place of habitation that day, and made his way thither without further delay.

When, however, he entered, at Roma's bidding, he found the girl alone at work. The blind man's chair was empty.

'I beg your pardon, Miss Meredith; I thought I should find your father here.'

'He has gone out,' answered Roma. 'Mrs. Lorraine kindly called for him, and asked him

to drive with her. But—but—I think he will be back very soon — if you don't mind waiting.'

There was a little hesitation in the girl's manner which struck Tor as being unusual. And it was rather unlike her to ask him to wait.

'I will do so with pleasure. This room is a delightful contrast to the heat out of doors. I hope I shall not be in your way.'

'No, not at all, thank you,' answered Roma, still intent on her modelling, and she did not look up as she continued speaking. 'In fact, I am rather glad you have come just now. I have wanted to speak to you about something; and I cannot do it when you are with father.'

Tor looked at her, and then seated himself at a little distance, wondering what was coming.

'I shall be honoured by any confidence you can make me, Miss Meredith. Is there anything I can do for you? I am afraid, by your face, that it is not of a very pleasant matter you have to speak.'

'No—not very,' answered Roma, without

looking up. And after a pause, she added, 'It is something about my father.'

Tor guessed at her meaning by the pained look on her face, and said, gently enough:

'Are you alluding to the state of his health?'

Roma looked up quickly, with startled eyes.

'Do you know it, too? Is it so apparent as that? Or has he said anything to you?'

'No, he has not told me anything; but he had an attack of faintness one day, when he was reaching up for a heavy book of engravings. It passed off almost at once; but it gave me an idea that there was some weakness of the heart. I hope you will not be alarmed at my frankness. It always seems to me that the truth is best spoken out.'

'Oh yes—yes!' cried Roma eagerly. 'It is such a comfort to be able to speak the truth about anything that is on one's mind. I have known it for some months; but I have never yet been able to say a word to anyone.'

'Have you had advice?'

'Yes; it was a doctor who told me; but father does not know, and he must not be told.

He is so excitable, and so nervous—you have noticed that, too?'

'Well, I have thought he might grow excited if I were to attempt an argument; but then I never do. I am no logician—I don't think arguing is ever any use. It only means a terrible waste of words, perhaps of temper, and everyone ends by thinking exactly as he did at first.'

Roma looked at him gratefully.

'It is so good of you always to let father have his own way in everything. I have noticed it, and been so much obliged.'

'I was not aware I had done anything to merit your gratitude. I have very much enjoyed the talks I have had with your father.'

'I am so glad you have,' said Roma, unbending more and more, and growing frank now that the ice was broken, and she was assured of her companion's comprehension and sympathy. 'You know, there are so few to talk to father here—in Italy we had lots of friends; but, you know,' and here a spasm of pain crossed her face, 'he had an accident—he went blind, and I think it has weakened him—his

brain as well as his heart. He is so irritable if he is crossed. He cannot bear contradiction. And so—and so—people have been vexed with him, and have gone away, and not come any more; and he seems to have lost all his friends.'

Roma spoke with a good deal of feeling. Indeed, she seemed half afraid she should show too much, and her voice quivered at times, and threatened to break. Tor hastened to her relief.

'I think I understand you, Miss Meredith. You mean that I am not to take fright at a few irritable words, or be offended if I am contradicted flatly. I assure you, you need have no fears. Mr. Meredith and I are capital friends, and mean to continue such. I shall avoid all exciting topics, because I see they injure him, and you need not be at all afraid that I shall lead him into argument or do anything to annoy or displease him. As I know that his health is affected, I shall be the more careful.'

Roma's face cleared visibly.

'Thank you very much, Mr. Debenham. It is kind of you to be so considerate. I did want to warn you against anything exciting,

because the doctor said it was so very bad for him. You see his blindness makes him live so much to himself, that he does not understand any point of view but his own.'

'I can quite understand that. It is very sad for him.'

'Very, indeed,' and again the spasm of pain —pain that was almost like remorse—crossed her face. 'It makes me want to spare him everything I can. I never cross him—never thwart him in anything. I would rather die than give him pain; especially now I know that pain might almost kill him. Of course I cannot expect others to feel as I do; but you have been so kind to him, Mr. Debenham, that I cannot help trusting you, though I have not spoken of this to anyone else. You will humour him, won't you? You will try not to cross or disturb him? He is fond of you, and I don't think he will ever be hard to deal with; but even if he is, you will try to soothe him without letting him get excited?'

'Certainly, Miss Meredith; you may trust me,' answered Tor readily; and there was no time to say more, for at that moment the door opened slowly and the blind man entered.

Tor pushed back his chair and advanced to meet him, talking gaily and unconcernedly; but Roma had been too much moved to assume in a moment her usual manner. Her voice betrayed to her father's fine ear, that something had occurred to disturb her customary equanimity, and he smiled to himself as he noted how particularly gentle, and almost filial, the young man's manner towards him had grown.

Roma made him some tea, and they both waited on him and anticipated his wants, and his peculiarly acute senses made him absolutely certain that some ground had been gained between them—some mutual understanding arrived at. He was complaisant and benign to both, and filled with a comfortable sense that he had not over-rated his powers, and that all was coming round in accordance with his plans.

When Tor was gone, Roma resumed her work, and her father was not ill-pleased to find that she was unusually silent and preoccupied.

'Well, Roma,' he said at last, 'how long had Philip Debenham been here?'

'Not very long; perhaps a quarter of an hour.'

'I am afraid I interrupted you.'

'Oh no!' Roma laughed, not quite naturally. 'It was you he came to see.'

'Ah, well, I don't know so much about that. You were very deep in talk.'

'Now, father, you know you didn't hear;' and, in spite of herself, Roma's voice shook with apprehension.

Michael Meredith smiled pleasantly.

'Well, Roma, you need not make such a mystery. Was he making love to you?'

'No.'

She was so astonished by the sudden charge, that she could only utter the monosyllable.

'Ah, well, we must have patience. I had hoped to hear that he had proposed.'

'Father!'

'Well, child'—he began to speak a little irritably—'it will soon come to that.'

'I don't know,' answered Roma guardedly.

'I do. Now, Roma, be frank with me; do you think he means marriage yet?'

'No, father.'

'Has he not looked love, or spoken love?'

'No, father.'

'I wonder at that, for I think he means it.'

Roma could not forbear saying:

'I do not think such a thing has ever entered his head.'

Meredith's face contracted with vexation for a moment, and then he smiled genially:

'You really think that, dear girl! Then it must be put into it, as soon as possible.'

'What do you mean, father?'

The old man was still smiling blandly and dreamily.

'I must open my mind to him on the subject; and tell him my wishes.'

'Father, father! don't do that!' cried poor Roma. 'Let the proposal come from him!'

'But you say he does not seem inclined to make it,' argued the old man, irritability struggling with calm superiority for the upper hand. 'Things cannot go on like this. The suspense is trying to me. I must have a conversation with him, and see if we cannot get it settled. I do not think he will needlessly thwart me. He is very fond of me, is young Phil Debenham.'

Roma's heart sank. Her late talk with Tor

rose up in her memory with dreadful distinctness. She had pleaded with him not to vex her father—not to cross his will. He had promised to avoid exciting him, had given his word that he would not cause him annoyance. And now her father was going to press her hand upon him—ask him to make her his wife! and he would think that she had known this all along, and had tried to entrap him into a temporizing, which would be a check on his liberty and a half-pledge to the egotistic old man.

Such a thought was terrible, yet Roma could not shake it off. What Philip Debenham would say to such a proposal she could not guess. Whatever answer he made, the humiliation to her would be the same. Refusal would make her father ill and miserable—might it not even cause his death? That thought was enough to prevent her from using her liberty and declining the offer of marriage if it should be made. Yet the idea of being handed over to a man, who had not demanded or wished her as a wife, was as repugnant to her as being sold into slavery. However the matter might end, poor Roma felt that she

would be disgraced for life; and yet she dared not speak one word of rebellion to her autocratic father. Words, as she well knew, would be worse than wasted upon him.

CHAPTER XIV.

MEREDITH'S PROPOSITION.

THAT talk with Roma in the studio left an impression upon Tor's mind which was decidedly favourable to the young sculptor. Hitherto he had thought her cold and proud, and decidedly uninteresting, in spite of her beauty.

Now, however, when she had thrown off for a moment her reserve, and had spoken her mind freely to him, had trusted him as a friend, and thrown herself, as it were, upon his mercy, now he felt to understand her better, and admired her more.

He was filled with a sense of compassion for the fate, which did not trouble her one whit. It seemed to him a melancholy thing for a young girl to be thus excluded from the world and all its gaieties, shut up all the best years

of her life in an obscure retreat, seeing nobody but an eccentric and egotistic blind father, and quite at the mercy of his whims and crotchets.

That she herself was unconscious of the hardship, and devoted to her father heart and soul, made the situation the more pathetic in his eyes ; and when he heard of her anxieties on the score of the blind man's health, and understood what such a fear ever before her eyes must be to her, then he pitied her still more sincerely, and determined at all costs to stand her father's friend and hers, and relieve her, if it were possible to do so, of some of the load of care, which he now knew must weigh upon her heavily.

He came often to the little house to talk to Meredith, and sometimes he drove him out, and, whenever he could, persuaded Roma to accompany them. He encouraged Maud to go often to see her, and, without betraying confidence, implied that he thought the poor girl must have a dull time of it, and suggested that she should be invited to Ladywell more frequently.

Maud began to think that her words to her

cousins were bringing their own fulfilment, and that Phil was growing very fond of Roma.

Sometimes, in a mischievous mood, she would try to tease her friend by hinting her suspicions; but Roma always silenced her by a look of pain and shame, which she found it hard to interpret.

Michael Meredith was calmly content, feeling somewhat as an emperor might, who had all things in his power, even the hearts and lives of his subjects, and had but to will, and the thing was done.

No doubts as to the reason of Tor's visits ever crossed his mind. He troubled himself with no fears, and felt no smallest dread of failure. Like most men who live entirely out of the world, he believed he knew it profoundly; and mistook his theories, founded on his own fanciful dreams, for the result of deep and experienced observation.

He had lived so long in the world of his own making, that he had almost forgotten the existence of any other. Tor was a regular visitor to his house, and was constantly thrown into the society of his beautiful daughter; and it

never occurred to him that he might be an equally constant visitor at other houses, and see there other women even more beautiful and attractive than his Roma. Neither did it trouble his head to remember how many handsome women the traveller must have come across in his wanderings, without falling into the snare of matrimony.

All such calculations were quite out of Mr. Meredith's habit of mind. He made his plans, and looked for their fulfilment as a matter of course.

Still, as days lengthened into weeks, and nothing came of the many opportunities the blind man gave for the young people to open their hearts to one another, he began to grow a little impatient. He did not see any need for so much courting. He liked a man to come to the point at once; and Tor's self-reliant boldness of speech and manner had made him suppose that he would not hesitate long, when once his mind was made up.

Michael Meredith, however, was not a bashful man, nor a man given to scruples of delicacy, in spite of his refined appearance and fastidious tastes. He had hitherto held back

from opening the subject simply because Roma had seemed to wish it, not from any feeling that it would be out of taste for him to offer his daughter in marriage to one of the wealthiest men in the county.

But as time went on, and the young man did not declare himself, in spite of his frequent opportunities, Mr. Meredith grew annoyed by his backwardness, and determined at length to make his way plain for him.

Tor had joined him in the garden one evening, to find him unusually silent and abstracted. He hardly returned any answers to his talk, and did not evince any interest in the news with which the young man sought to beguile him.

'I am afraid you are not well, sir,' he said at length; 'I fear my talk tires you. I had better perhaps leave you now. I suppose the heat of the weather is trying to you, as it is to many people.'

Meredith seemed to wake with a start, as from a reverie. He held up his hand as if to bid Tor keep his seat, and at the same time to command silence.

Tor could not but smile at the unconsciously

melodramatic air adopted by the old man. It was these little affectations which amused and puzzled him in his intercourse with Phil's father's friend.

'Do not go, Philip Debenham, do not go. I am but poor company to-day, I own ; yet do not go. I have been thinking much of you to-day—much of you and of my dear girl, my peerless Roma. My thoughts have been busy with the future, boy.'

'Indeed,' answered Tor, with an amused smile. 'I hope they have been pleasantly occupied.'

Meredith shook his head thoughtfully.

'A beautiful daughter, Philip, is a great care.'

'And a very pleasant one, I imagine, sir.'

'Well, yes—yes, pleasant in the present, but a sad cause for anxiety when one looks into the future.'

Tor smiled again, for he was amused by Meredith's solemnity of manner.

'Perhaps, then, sir, it would be best to avoid doing so. The future generally manages to take care of itself, even without the benefit of our care.'

'Do not jest, Philip Debenham—do not jest on so deep a subject.'

'I am only speaking from experience,' answered Tor lightly. 'You must admit, looking back eighteen years, that the future dealt kindly by me.'

'The future of a woman is a very serious matter,' continued Meredith, unwilling to be diverted from his point, 'especially when she has beauty and wealth.'

'Those attributes are generally considered an advantage to anyone,' suggested Tor. 'You talk as if it added a load to your mind.'

'So it does, boy; so it does. You are not a father, or you would understand. My daughter is beautiful, you know. She is also something of an heiress, for her mother was rich, and we live now in Arcadian simplicity. I fear greatly for her future, when I am no more. Who will then watch over and guard her as I have done?'

'I should think,' answered Tor, with gravity, 'that Miss Meredith would not be long in finding a natural protector in the form of a husband, if once it were permitted to her to see more of the world.'

Michael Meredith smiled in his slow dreamy fashion.

'You think her, then, so beautiful?'

'Undoubtedly so.'

'I can tell you, in all sincerity, that she is as good as she is beautiful.'

'I can believe it,' answered Tor heartily. 'I am convinced of it.'

'She has been the most devoted of daughters,' continued the blind man, with deliberate emphasis, 'and I am certain that she will be the most devoted of wives.'

'I should quite think so too,' answered Tor, rather wondering whither all this was tending, but humouring the old man's fancy, as his habit was. He did not for a moment doubt Roma's perfections, but the subject was not of absorbing interest to him.

The next question fairly startled him out of all his lazy indifference.

'If you think all this, Philip Debenham—if you see her to be what she is, beautiful, devoted, unselfish—if you know her birth to be equal to yours, and her wealth not altogether disproportionate, why do you not ask her in

marriage yourself, before any other man steps in to carry off the treasure ?'

Tor sat silent and half stupefied for a moment. He had had a good many experiences in his lifetime before, but nothing quite like this. His ready *sang-froid* almost deserted him for a moment, and he looked completely disconcerted.

'I have not thought of getting married,' he said, the colour mounting slowly in his face, though there was nobody to see it.

'Then it is high time you began to do so,' returned Michael Meredith, with something of judicial severity in his tone.

Tor felt much disposed to bid him mind his own business, but a glance into the pale, eager face deterred him. He saw that the blind man's whole soul was in the subject he had propounded, and that a very little would agitate him profoundly, perhaps dangerously. His promise to Roma rose up before him. He would not go from his word to her, yet the position was distinctly embarrassing.

'Really, sir, I have had so much to think of since I came to England, that I have given hardly any thought to the subject you name.'

'Ah, indeed; yes, I suppose a sudden accession of property does bring many cares with it. Still, you must be aware that it is almost impossible for a man in your position to remain long unmarried. It does not do; his duty to society demands that he shall take a wife. Your own sense of the fitness of things must, I think, tell you that.'

'I dare say you may be right, but I am no judge in such matters. Maud and my aunt keep house and entertain guests, and I fancied that was all that was needful; but no doubt you know best.'

'Yes, Philip; I suppose I do know more of the world than you. I have been thinking a great deal of you and of your future. I like you, Philip, and I trust you. I would give much to see you well settled in life, with a woman who would make you really happy. I believe that my Roma could do that; and I could trust her to you without a doubt and without a fear.'

'You pay me a high compliment, Mr. Meredith. I am obliged by your good opinion.'

'Not at all—not at all. My friend Philip Debenham's son must always stand next to

my own child in my affections. Do you know, boy, that I owe all my prosperity in life to him ?'

'No, I did not know it.'

'I will tell you the story—then you will perhaps the better understand the wish which has grown up in my heart.

'I am well born, Philip, and I was well educated ; but misfortune fell upon our family, and I was left alone in the world, without money and without a profession ; for I had been brought up a gentleman at large. Art was my only resource ; Italy my only field. I went to Italy and painted, and starved there for many long, weary years. I could not sell my pictures ; but I found I had skill in modelling, and I got some poor work to do in a sculptor's studio. My talent in that line became noticed, and I rose, by slow degrees, to be of use to my master in his greater works ; but before I had attained the fame he prophesied for me, he died, and I was turned adrift once more.

'This time I was somewhat better off. I hired a studio, and set up for myself ; but no commissions came, and I was reduced to the

lowest depths of poverty again. It was then that your father found me. Chance brought him to my studio, and there his artist's eye taught him at once the value of my work. He was rich, and he was the leader of a certain art circle in Rome. He took me up, and made me known. Commissions flowed in, and I became prosperous. He introduced me to the beautiful and wealthy young countess, who consented to share my lot, and become the wife of the once penniless sculptor; and as her husband, my name was made, my fortune secure.

'But I never forgot that to Philip Debenham I owed all my wealth and happiness; I am not ungrateful, and I never was tempted to forget that fact. I saw little of him in later years; but until the close of his life we never ceased to correspond.

'I knew little of his changed circumstances till the accident of my blindness (Roma will perhaps tell you of that some day; I never speak of it) drove me to seek an asylum in my native country. My wife was dead, and Italy had lost its greatest hold upon me then. I thought I should like to settle near to where my old friend had lived, and to give

my Roma the pleasure of friendship with his children.

'Very much shocked and surprised was I to find that his wealth had all vanished in his lifetime, and that his son was a wanderer on the face of the earth, without money and without the means to make it. My natural lethargy and indolence prevented my taking active steps then in your favour; besides, Maud always kept me informed of your doings; and I knew you were happy in your travels, in the society of your friend. But none the less did I make the resolution that half my wealth should pass to you at my death; and that if you returned home heart-whole and fancy-free, you should marry my Roma, and become my son in deed and truth, as you are in the love my soul bestows on you.'

The blind man paused, as if fatigued by so long a speech, and by the emotions it had called up in his mind. Tor, who had listened intently, now spoke.

'I think I understand better now. It was to Philip Debenham—my father—that you consider you owe your success in life; and you

are anxious that the fruits of it should pass to his son?'

'Yes; I wished it when you were a poor man—I cannot change because you are rich. I wished that you should be Roma's husband when I had never even seen you, and when my fancy could not but conjure up the portrait of a rough-and-ready traveller, half Englishman, half Yankee. Even then I wanted you for a son, for your father's sake. Can you wonder that I want it more, now that you have appeared upon the scene a polished English gentleman, full of kindliness, honour, and chivalry? Philip, do not disappoint me; do not break my heart. Do not tell me that my dream of years is but an old man's foolish fancy, and must be cast on one side, like a discarded garment. Tell me that you will love and cherish my child, my Roma; and that you will be a son to me in my old age.'

Tor made no immediate response, but sat still, feeling the position inconceivably awkward.

It was not to him at all that this offer of Roma's hand was made, but to Philip Debenham; and the girl's dark Italian beauty was just

the kind he admired most, and her quiet, self-contained nature the type which best suited his facile and mercurial temperament. It behoved him to act with caution, so as not to block his friend's way too much, should he be prepared to accept Meredith's offer ; and it was of great importance not to excite the nervous old man more than was absolutely necessary. At the same time Tor's loyalty to Maud made him very reluctant to compromise himself.

'You have taken me by surprise, sir. I am much touched by your expressions towards myself and my father, but you must give me time. I have never thought of your daughter in this light before.'

A look of jealous distrust crossed the blind man's face.

'You have not gone and entangled yourself abroad? You have not got a wife in some foreign place?'

Tor's laugh was hearty enough to drive out all suspicion of distrust.

'Indeed, no, sir. I have seen too much of such things ever to be tempted. If ever I marry a wife, she will be one whom I am not ashamed to own before all the world.'

'Right, boy, right; you are your father's own son. But tell me—pardon my intrusiveness—have you come home quite heart-whole? Is there no beauty on some southern shore to whom your fancy roves lovingly back—whom you would fain bring to England as your wife?'

Tor answered honestly enough in the negative, and Meredith's face cleared.

'You have not been long enough here to have lost your heart. Roma cannot have a rival yet.'

Tor smiled to himself, but his voice was serious enough.

'Your daughter and my sister Maud are the only two women I have really admired since I came over.'

'That is good. Then you are quite fancy-free—your heart is in your own keeping.'

This was a comment, not a question, which was well, for it would have been awkward for Philip Debenham to have had to announce himself in love with his sister; and though Tor had no great compunction in acting a part, he had a distinct aversion to speaking a lie. He felt his position growing more and more

complicated and uncomfortable; but at the same time his sense of humour could not but enable him to enjoy it, when there was no pressing danger to apprehend.

'Then you will think over what I have said, Philip?' said Michael Meredith, after a pause.

'I will indeed, sir.'

'And you will give me your answer soon?'

'I must ask you, sir, not to hurry me as to that. I have a good deal on my mind just now, and so important a decision as this must not be hurried. I am afraid I am not made of the inflammable stuff of which lovers are generally supposed to be composed; and I do not know your daughter well—greatly as I admire her—nor does she know anything of me. Give us time to learn each other's characters, and above all, say nothing to her to disturb her unconsciousness and freedom. You see, I treat you as frankly as you treat me; and when my answer is ready, you shall have it.'

'He is safe enough,' said Meredith to himself, as Tor strode away. 'He is cautious and thoughtful; perhaps at his age that is natural, but he is safe enough. Roma has no rival,

that is the great point; the rest will all follow.'

'I think I managed that rather well,' mused Tor as he walked home, half amused, half annoyed by the interview. 'I didn't agitate the old buffer. I didn't commit myself, and I've gained time, which is everything. Never thought I could combine the serpent and the dove quite so neatly. Phil, you young rascal, if you don't come to your senses pretty quick now, I shall feel inclined to blow your brains out, and have done with you and your confounded affairs once and for all! Why was I ever fool enough to make a friend?'

CHAPTER XV.

DANGERS AHEAD.

'MATILDA,' said Bertha Belassis, 'don't you think it rather odd that Sir Herbert Moncrieff was so sure that Phil was Mr. Torwood?'

'Was he so sure? I fancied he had only made a mistake. Philip didn't seem to think it so very odd. I suppose they have been mistaken for one another before.'

'Yes; but he spoke of it again to me afterwards; and did I tell you about Maud?'

'No. What?'

'I don't think I thought of it at the time particularly; but afterwards, turning it over in my mind, I couldn't help thinking it rather strange.'

'What?' questioned Matilda impatiently. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Well, I'm just going to tell you. We were walking about the grounds, Sir Herbert and I (he really was very attentive to me, Matilda!), when we came across Maud, talking and laughing with some fellow, and looking quite pretty and animated. I noticed Sir Herbert looked at her rather hard, and, when we had passed, he said: "I think I cannot be mistaken in identifying that lady as Miss Torwood? She is so like her brother." I stared at him, and said: "That is my cousin, Maud Debenham; but I do not think she is at all like Philip." He looked quite flustered and puzzled for a bit, and said slowly: "Let me think; I can't make it out. That lady is exceedingly like a man whom I believed to be Philip Debenham, and she *is* Miss Debenham! But the man is not a Debenham at all, but Torwood—I had confused the two fellows. 'Odd coincidence, isn't it?" He laughed, and then passed the matter off, as though he had been surprised into saying something rather strange, and wanted it forgotten. I didn't trouble my head about it at the time. It didn't seem to me to matter much, if Maud did happen to be rather like Mr. Torwood. But when one comes to think

over it all, it does seem rather odd, doesn't it? Everyone says Phil isn't a bit like a Debenham.'

'Goodness gracious, Bertha! don't go putting notions into people's heads!' cried Matilda, in some alarm. 'It can't be anything but Sir Herbert's stupidity—or, perhaps, some spite against poor Phil. It would be very awkward for him to have such things said of him; and papa and mamma would be simply offensive if they could get hold of anything and trump up a story. Mamma would be delighted to try and make out that Phil wasn't Phil at all, but an impostor. There's nothing too nasty for her to say or do when she's disagreeable, which she mostly is now.'

'Good gracious, Matilda! you're out-Herroding Herod, talking about impostors. Why, how could Phil be that? He's got everything, and knows everything needful to identify him! Of course he's Phil! How could he be anybody else? But, of course, I shan't say a word to mamma or anybody. If she were to get hold of such an idea, there would be no peace for anyone. And I'm sure nobody could be kinder or nicer than Phil; and who-

ever he is, we don't want him changed for anybody else.'

An odd sort of fancy was suggesting itself to the minds of both girls; but they did not choose to give it words even to themselves. Neither of them had relinquished the hope of becoming the mistress of the Manor, and Tor's pleasant, flattering, cousinly air kept him a prime favourite with both sisters. At the present moment, neither would have moved hand or foot, if by so doing any annoyance could fall upon him; but if jealousy or dislike should be stirred up in either heart, it was altogether uncertain how any secret might be preserved.

'It couldn't possibly be, you know,' said Bertha, with a laugh, not specifying what the 'it' might be. 'It's not possible, of course. But it will be fun to tease Phil about it, just to see what he says.'

'I'd advise you not to say anything at all about it,' said Matilda. 'You'll only annoy him.'

'Nonsense! Phil and I are capital friends. He likes fun as much as I do.'

'Well, do as you like,' returned Matilda,

thinking to herself that if Bertha chose to go and spoil her own chances, it might not be such a bad thing for somebody else.

'Yes, I mean to. I like chaffing Phil, and he likes it too.'

Bertha, on her part, was thinking that she might do worse than have a secret with her handsome cousin, for he could not but perceive the awkwardness of Sir Herbert Moncrieff's suggestion; and if—— But not even to herself did the girl complete that train of thought.

The next time she had her cousin to herself, she put her threat into execution.

'Phil,' she began, looking up at him archly, 'don't you think that was a very odd mistake of Sir Herbert Moncrieff's the other day?'

'What mistake? Taking me for Torwood? Well, yes—rather, perhaps. It all comes of that lazy beggar Tor giving me all the work to do, whilst everything went down in his name, as he had the money, you know.'

'Oh, I see,' said Bertha, her half-formed theory fading a little before his quiet nonchalance. 'You used always to act for him, did you?'

'Well, yes, mostly. He's a lazy beggar, as I said before, and was ready to let anybody and everybody cheat him. So I generally made the bargains, and wrote the orders, and signed everything "Torwood;" so naturally I got taken for him, and then Tor would say: "Oh, don't bother to undeceive them, or they'll all come pestering me. Let me be Phil Debenham, insignificant and dependent." Of course the old chap had to have his own way.'

Tor's voice expressed a quiet amusement and an obvious mimicry which was irresistible. Bertha laughed, and felt her suspicions vanishing.

'I wonder, then, what made Sir Herbert think Maud so very like Mr. Torwood—the one he had always thought Phil Debenham, you know.'

'Did he think that?' asked Tor lazily.

'Yes. Are they alike really?'

'Tor and Maud alike,' said Tor slowly and reflectively. 'I don't know that it ever struck me; but some people have a faculty for seeing likenesses; I don't think I possess it. Let me see: well, perhaps there is a sort of simi-

larity in style, hair and eyes the same colour, and he has rather that oval-shaped face of hers; but I think the likeness begins and ends there. I think Maud is uncommonly good-looking, and Tor never set up for being a beauty. Well, when he comes over here on a visit, we will put them together and see if there is a visible likeness. I rather imagine it exists only in Sir Herbert Moncrieff's imagination.'

Tor spoke with such frank and easy coolness that Bertha was disarmed. Her confidence in her own penetration convinced her that she should have detected him at once, had he been the least bit startled or embarrassed, and he had not evinced the faintest sign of being the one or the other.

One more attempt did she make to force his confidence.

'Of course I don't mean to say anything of this to anybody, Phil.'

'Why not?'

Bertha gave her head an expressive shake.

'I thought it might be awkward for you.'

Tor laughed in his mirthful way.

'Why on earth? I think it's rather a good joke. How could it be awkward for me, fair cousin?'

'Oh, I don't know. It was only a silly fancy of mine,' answered Bertha confusedly; for in the light of Tor's cool, unconcerned demeanour, her suspicions did look both foolish and uncalled for. 'All the same, I shan't talk about it, because I shouldn't like anyone else to fancy such things.'

'Fancies are harmless luxuries, are they not? I am sure I have no wish to stand in the way of anyone's imagination,' answered Tor lazily. 'At the same time, let me thank you for your evident goodwill on my behalf; I shall not forget that you have wished to stand between me and even an imaginary annoyance. I appreciate your consideration, my dear cousin.'

Bertha smiled and blushed, and felt greatly delighted at having provoked such words as these. He had not even guessed at the ridiculous blunder she had made, and had been quite grateful for her confidence.

Bertha was more than ever determined to

keep her secret, whether he cared for its preservation or not, so that he would not have cause to think she had made a vain promise, which she intended to break.

Tor's face was somewhat grave and preoccupied as he walked home. Could Bertha have seen him then, she might have fancied her words had made a deeper impression than she believed at the time. However, his meditations ended after all in a laugh.

'Possession is nine points of the law. They would find it rather a difficult matter to oust me now, even if they got the clue; and it's too nasty a charge to bring up on insufficient evidence. Young Moncrieff's recognition and ideas as to likeness are about all that could turn up against me—that, or similar identifications. Old Belassis is too much afraid of me to proceed, unless he was sure of his cause, and in any case he would think twice before getting quite out at elbows with me. I don't think I need be much afraid. I am learning the art of brazening things out finely. Practice makes perfect. By the time old Phil comes round, I dare say I could stand him out that he was I, and I he, if he weren't so completely

the Debenham, and so like Maud. I wish he would come soon, I know. I'm uncommonly tired of playing the brother's part, and waiting her pleasure as to young Belassis; though I don't believe she will marry him, when it comes to the point.'

Tor was so far settled down in his new life, and to his assumed character, that he played the part quite naturally and without any effort. He was interested in the farm-work upon the estate, and entered into it with great zest. He had been long enough in America to learn the use and value of machines almost unknown to the rustic population of Ladywell, and he made a few daring innovations, which were at first the laughing-stock, and then the wonder and admiration of all the people round.

Certainly his management, combined with the good season, made agricultural matters look up again; and the bailiff told him, with wonder and delight, that this year he believed the farm would pay its way, and not be a loss. He was disappointed that Tor was not as rapturously enthusiastic at this news as he should have been, and discovered that the young

squire laboured under the delusion that farms were profitable concerns.

But the quiet course of country life never seemed to run smoothly for very long together. Tor was not permitted to enjoy Phil's rights undisturbed for any protracted period. The next blow was dealt him from quite an unexpected quarter.

One day he received by the morning's post a letter bearing the postmark 'Whitbury.' It was a square envelope, in thick, creamy paper, and bore a handsome coat-of-arms upon it, in place of a crest, by which Tor imagined his correspondent to be a lady, and a lady of some social standing.

He turned the letter over and over, with a puzzled expression of countenance.

'Whitbury, Whitbury,' he mused; 'surely that name is familiar—it seems associated with my dim recollections of my father. Why, yes, I have it now. That is the name of the place where I was born—where that house of mine is. To be sure that's it. But who can be writing to Phil from there? It can't surely be on any business of mine. The agent sees to all that. I know nothing about

it. Well, I'd better open the letter and see.'

Suiting the action to the words, Tor cut open the envelope, and read the missive enclosed.

'SIR,

'I have been informed by Mr. Torwood's agent that during some indisposition, from which he is suffering, you are acting for him in a business capacity. To you, then, I must appeal upon a matter of business which threatens to become pressing.

'I am a tenant of Mr. Torwood's, and the lease of this house, which I have occupied for twenty-eight years, is all but run out. I am anxious to renew it, and that upon equitable terms; but I do not like Mr. Torwood's agent, and I am sure he will not fairly represent to his client the state of the case, and will propose terms which are only advantageous to him, without being just to me. I always do dislike middle-men, and I am quite determined that this matter shall be settled without having recourse to them.

'I know that if Mr. Torwood were able to

do so, he would be willing to undertake the trouble of a journey to Whitbury, to see his father's old friend, and do her a kindness. I cannot tell how far you, his deputy, are prepared to act, but can only say that I should esteem a visit as a personal favour, and should be extremely obliged if you would come and see me and the house, and ascertain for yourself the true state of the case. I feel convinced that we should then have no difficulty in coming to terms as to the new lease, for my wish is to have justice on both sides.

'I trust that you will grant me the favour I ask.

'Yours faithfully,

'MARJORY DESCARTES.

'Minster House, Whitbury.'

Tor pulled vigorously at his moustache, and paced the room thoughtfully. He was alone, for he had been out upon the farm early, and had come in before the breakfast-hour, and the ladies were not yet down.

'Marjory Descartes! yes, I remember the name. My father spoke to me sometimes of Mr. Descartes and Miss Marjory. She is evidently Miss Marjory still. Why, of course

she may have the house on any terms she likes to propose. I believe I've had somewhere about a hundred a year from it all this while. I'll renew the lease on the same terms if she likes. It would be a shame to try and "do" a good tenant, such as she has always been. But I don't see exactly why I need go down in person to tender this assurance; not that there could be any danger to my *incog.*, as I haven't been there since I was a baby: but I don't see any good in mixing myself up more than is needful with my own affairs just now; and Wetherby might know me, if I were to come across him, as I have seen him from time to time, though not for many years now. I shouldn't mind seeing the place and the house at all; but I'll put it off, I think, until I can go as Torwood, not as Debenham. I'll write to Miss Marjory, and guarantee that she shall not be disturbed or annoyed. I think that ought to satisfy her.'

So Tor, during the course of the day, penned the following neat little epistle:

'Dear Madam,

'I have received your letter about the house of my friend Mr. Torwood, which you

rent, and am in a position to assure you that you have nothing to fear in your dealings with him. I hope, before very long, he will have recovered his health, and be able to pay his respects to you in person; and meantime I shall write to the agent to let him know that things are to go on as they are for a year. By that time Mr. Torwood will have resumed the management of his own affairs, and will be able to settle with you the terms of the new lease, which I am sure he will draw up so as to meet your views.

'I trust this guarantee on my part will relieve you from all further anxiety. If my going to Whitbury could be of any service to you, should be very pleased to accept your kind invitation; but if I take the steps I propose, I do not see what advantage would be gained by my doing so.

'I shall acquaint Mr. Torwood with what has passed, as soon as he is in a fit state to attend to business matters.

'Yours faithfully,

'PHILIP DEBENHAM.

'Ladywell Manor.'

'There, I think that will satisfy the old

lady,' said Tor, as he folded and addressed his letter. 'How things come back to one! I can remember how often my father spoke of Miss Marjory, and how much he seemed to admire her force of character and determination. I must certainly go and see her some day when I have cast off my shell; but I will wait for that first, and go *in propriâ personâ*.'

Tor had yet to learn the extent of Miss Marjory's force of character.

Two or three days later came another Whitbury letter.

'Confound the old girl!' thought Tor irreverently. 'What can she want now?'

That the letter speedily explained.

'Dear Sir,

'I am grateful for your prompt and courteous reply to my letter; but at the same time there is so much I wish to say to Mr. Torwood or his deputy, that I cannot feel satisfied without a personal interview. Women, as you know, are fidgety creatures, and I share this weakness. Mr. Torwood's illness seems a serious matter, by what I gather; and I do

not like waiting and suspense. There are several things I want done about the place, and I do not like to settle anything until I can see my landlord. You stand towards me in that position just now, and therefore I want to see you. You are a gentleman, which the agent is not; and I can deal with you, as I cannot possibly do with him.

'I trust that you will humour this fancy of mine, and come over at your early convenience. I think when we meet, I can convince you that it is not a mere freak of imagination that a personal inspection is necessary. Besides which, now is the time for working. Our hard winter frosts prevent any kind of building-work during a great part of the year.

'If you will kindly consent to come, and will name your day and train, I will see that you are met at the station; and if you will spend the night here, instead of at the hotel, you will be doing me an additional pleasure. The journey cannot be taken twice upon the same day.

'Yours sincerely,

'Marjory Descartes.

'Minster House, Whitbury.'

'I suppose I must go now,' said Tor, half aloud.

'Go where?' asked Maud.

'To Yorkshire, on some business of poor Tor's.'

Maud put on an air of reproach.

'You are always tearing off somewhere, Phil. Why must you go? Can't you write?'

'I did try to do it by writing; but I find it won't do.'

'I wish that old Tor would come back, and do his work for himself,' cried Maud.

'So do I,' answered Tor, so fervently that Maud looked at him and asked:

'Is it disagreeable business, then, Phil?'

'Oh no! not bad; only some business with a tenant about a house of his. But I'm shy, you know; and she's a lady, and I know she'll get her own way with me, to the detriment of Tor's pocket.'

'Take me with you, poor, shy little boy!' laughed Maud; 'I'll see you're not bullied.'

'I should like to take you well enough; only I'm to be her guest, and couldn't bring a sister very well.'

'How did she know to write to you?'

'The agent told her I was acting for Tor.'

'Oh; and how is Tor, Phil? You never speak of him.'

'He's much the same; very queer and seedy. I must go and see after him one of these days.'

'Everybody says you ought to bring him to England to be doctored,' said Maud, flushing up a little. 'It makes me quite angry, but they keep on saying that you ought not to leave him alone, and ill, when he did so much for you. I know it's all right if *you* do it; but I can't stop people's mouths, and it is so horrid. I wish you would bring him over, Phil.'

'I will, as soon as ever I can; but he is not well enough yet to travel. He is under one of the best men in Germany, and I don't believe any English physician could do more for him. Don't you worry over what people say, little sister. I know that you will trust me through thick and thin, and that is all I care for.'

'I will, I do!' cried Maud, with enthusiasm; and Mrs. Lorraine's gentle voice added:

'I think nobody who really knows dear Philip could do otherwise.'

Tor looked pleased, and bent down to kiss his aunt.

'I think I have made at least two staunch friends, who will stand by me through everything.'

'Of course!' cried Maud, with energy; 'but why should you talk as if you might need people to stand by you? And why don't you kiss me too?'

He laughed, and turned again to his letter.

'I'll write at once, and fix to-morrow. Best get the business over as early as possible.'

So his note was written accepting Miss Marjory's hospitality; and Tor made a few preparations, consulted Bradshaw, and arranged to leave in the morning and return the following afternoon.

'I hope this affair will not lead to any more complications,' he said to himself, when seated in the train. 'I have quite enough on my hands without that; but I don't see how it can. Not a soul there knows me, so I think I may feel quite safe.'

CHAPTER XVI.

AN ODD INTERVIEW.

MISS MARJORY had got her way, and Mr. Debenham was coming down that very day, to see about the business in hand.

'He has not lost time, at any rate,' quoth the brisk little gentlewoman, looking up from her letter. 'He is coming this very afternoon. Well, I'm glad to find young men are not altogether too lazy to exert themselves in anybody's business but their own. Horace, I'll thank you to meet the 4.15 train this afternoon. It will look more polite if you go in person. He will remain the night—I am glad to see he is not too stiff or too proud for that—so I will take care he has a good dinner. Nothing like a good dinner to put a man in a good temper. If it were young Torwood, now,

I'd have a few of his father's old friends in to meet him; as it is, I suppose he would not thank me for the attention, and would only be politely bored. Well, well! one can't have perfection; and Mr. Debenham has acted in a very gentlemanlike manner throughout. Let me see, now. Soup and salmon, of course, and a light *entrée* or two—two will be enough, I think; saddle of mutton, and two of my best chickens; pity game is not in season, but that can't be helped. There's that Stilton in prime condition, and sweets and fruits; but he won't care for them, I imagine. I think he won't find much fault with my father's wines, however. Yes, we can give him as good a dinner as need be, and show him what Whitbury hospitality is like. I must go and talk to cook.'

Miss Marjory hastened away, her household keys jangling as she moved, to interview her model cook, and consult over Tor's dinner.

Ethel laughed, and so did her brother.

'She talks dreadfully against young men,' said he, 'but she does not seem altogether indifferent when one is coming.'

'I think it's very good-natured of Mr.

Debenham to come all this way,' remarked Ethel. 'I hope Cousin Marjory will not tease him very much, or bother his life out with her theories.'

'Cousin Marjory is a clever woman, Ethel,' returned Horace. 'She does not bore people half so much as you fancy.'

'She never bores me,' Ethel said hastily, 'because I am so fond of her; but she is funny, you know, Horace, and says one thing one day and quite another the next, and always seems to want to argue everything with you. One never knows what she will say next, and she doesn't care whom she snubs.'

'That is the chief beauty of it,' laughed Horace. 'She is so delightfully impartial that we all get it alike. Never you mind, Ethel: her bark is worse than her bite; and, depend upon it, Whitbury would never be the place it is, if it were not for her sharp tongue. They all say that it is she who keeps all the tradespeople up to the mark, to say nothing of stopping society here from stagnating through idleness.'

Certainly Miss Marjory was not going to let

anything stagnate that day. Within and without, all her household were busily employed making the old place look its brightest.

'He shall have a good report to take back to young Torwood. He shan't think I boast in vain, when I talk of the improvements I have made in the house. I can see he means to be reasonable, but I don't choose to be yielded to just because I'm a woman. I wish him to see what I really have done, and appeal to his sense of justice. And I want him to sink me that new well, and to put continuous iron fencing in place of that old wooden paling that's all broken down. Nothing like being a good tenant for making a good landlord; and if he has any sense of the fitness of things, I shall get my own way.'

Miss Marjory certainly seemed to go about with the air of one used to her own way; and after Horace had gone to the station, she repaired to her own room, to make herself neat and attractive in the stranger's eyes.

'Nothing like producing a good impression at first,' she remarked to herself, as she arranged her cap and the dainty lace ruffles round her neck and wrists.

Miss Marjory always looked well dressed, even when going about her garden-work in what she termed her 'chrysalis-shell;' in her black satin and old lace she was undeniably handsome, and a model specimen of a well-bred, well-to-do English gentlewoman.

She heard the dogcart drive up to the door, and the sharp ring at the bell; and knew that the stranger would be waiting for her alone in the drawing-room. Ethel had gone to a tennis-party, and Horace was due at the Minster for evensong. On the whole, she was pleased that this was the case.

She tripped lightly down the wide staircase, and entered the room so noiselessly that the young man, standing beside the window, which commanded the fine view of open country, did not at once perceive her, and she paused for a moment before advancing to greet her guest.

She had come in with a courteous smile of anticipated greeting upon her face, such as a hostess is wont to bestow upon a stranger she is glad to welcome; but when her eyes fell upon the tall, well-made figure, the tawny head and decisive features, a great surprise

flashed over her face, and the smile changed to one of beaming pleasure.

'Mr. Torwood!' she exclaimed, with an accent of extreme gratification and pleasure. 'Torrington Torwood himself, whom I saw last a baby in long-clothes! This is a delightful surprise! Are you better, then? I am so glad! How delighted everyone here will be to make your acquaintance!'

She shook hands warmly with the young man; but he, although a pleasant smile, and rather a humorous one, shone out of his eyes, did not exactly respond to the warmness of Miss Marjory's greeting.

'Pardon me, Miss Descartes; if you have not seen my friend Torwood since his long-clothes days, it is hardly to be expected that you could recognise him. Did I not make it plain that I am merely his substitute, Philip Debenham?'

Miss Marjory took one backward step, and looked up into the frank, bronzed face above her.

'Do you mean to tell me that you are Mr. Debenham?' she asked.

'Certainly I do.'

'And do you expect to be believed?'

'Well, yes, I certainly did.'

Miss Marjory laughed in genuine amusement.

'Don't talk nonsense to me, Torrington Torwood. I know better than to believe it.'

The stranger looked at her with his pleasant smile.

'But, Miss Descartes, you really must believe me.'

'Believe that your name is Debenham! Stuff and nonsense! As if anyone would ever believe that, who had known your father. You are the very image of what Guy Torwood was at your age. Debenham indeed! I never heard anything so ridiculous in all my life—never!'

'But, my dear madam——'

'But, my dear sir, it is not the least use your trying to make a fool of me. Guy Torwood was a great friend of mine—indeed, he once did me the honour to make me an offer of marriage; and if he had done so a second time, I'm not sure but what I should have said "yes." But he saw Lucile Torrington,

and it was all over with him then. However, it isn't very likely that I have forgotten Guy Torwood, or that I should not recognise his son, who has grown up his very image.'

'But, Miss Descartes——'

'But, Mr. Torwood, don't you try that on any more with me. But for a mere accident, I might have been your mother. What is the use of your trying to deceive me? You had better give it up with a good grace.'

The young man seemed to think so too, for his face changed, and the smiling assurance was replaced by an expression of serious gravity, which surprised Miss Marjory, who had merely fancied that a boyish trick was being played off upon her.

'Miss Marjory,' said Tor, unconsciously falling into the name that he had learnt from his father's lips, 'I see that I cannot keep up my disguise before you. But may I ask as a great favour, involving more than I can explain, that I may still be Philip Debenham to you and all here, and that you will not betray my identity to any living soul? I throw myself upon your mercy, Miss Marjory; I do not

think you will readily betray your old friend's son.'

His earnestness startled Miss Marjory.

'Sit down,' she said, suiting the action to the words herself—'sit down; I must understand more of this. I hope you do not mean that you have brought your honoured father's name into such disgrace, that you are obliged to change it for a stranger's.'

'No, no,' answered Tor quickly; 'not that. I have never——' then, bethinking himself that his present course of conduct might not be approved in the eyes of the world, he paused, and added, 'I do not think I have ever done what *he* would have been ashamed to witness.'

Miss Marjory's face cleared. There was a frankness in Tor's manner which disarmed suspicion. This manner had often stood him in good stead of late, and did so at the present crisis.

She looked sharply at him, and then began to ask pertinent questions.

'You admit that you are Torrington Torwood?'

'I have no choice in the matter,' an-

swered Tor, with a smile; 'I am forced to do so.'

'And you wish to pass under the name of Philip Debenham?'

'I do.'

'Is there a Philip Debenham in reality?'

'Yes.'

'And have you and he changed names and positions?'

'Yes.'

'How many people are in this plot?'

'Nobody knows of its existence save myself, and now yourself. You and I, Miss Marjory, are the sole conspirators.'

'And Philip Debenham.'

'No. He knows no more about it than that table. He is lying ill, unconscious of what is passing, at a doctor's house in Germany.'

'Torrington Torwood, you called me just now a conspirator, and perhaps I may consent to be one, for I cannot but like you for your father's sake. But I must know the rights of this. I never choose to act in the dark. I shall not abuse your confidence, whether I become an ally or not. You had better make a clean breast of it, and tell me all; and then, if I

approve your course of action, I do not say but that I may be willing to help you, if I can.'

'Thank you, Miss Marjory. I am sure I can trust you, from what my father has told me of you, and of Whitbury. I believe my only course is to take you into my confidence.'

'To be sure it is. I am a woman, so I am curious, and of course I like a little bit of intrigue. Come, now, tell me all about it. Mr. Debenham is ill, and unconscious, and you have adopted his name and position, and yet nobody knows. How is that?'

'Because nobody has seen him since he was ten years old. His father died then, and an old brute of an uncle sent him abroad and kept him there; and before he had ever been home at all, his uncle found him such an uncongenial berth in an office, that he elected to cut and run, and came to me, and we have been travelling the world over, he and I, these ten years; but as none of his people have seen him since he was a small boy, I pass for him easily enough.'

'But why should you pass for him? Why

doesn't he—why don't you bring him over and wait till he recovers ?'

'Because the date of his recovery is very doubtful, and the journey to England was impossible for him then.'

'But why did you personate him ? Why could you not speak the truth about it ?'

'I believe now, that that would have been the best way ; but the idea struck me all in a moment, and it seemed too good a joke to lose. The comic side was certainly uppermost in my mind at first ; and only when it was too late to draw back, did I realize the more serious aspect of the affair.'

'But I want to understand better. Are you trying to be of use to him—or what ? Why did it become necessary for him to go to his relations at all ?'

'I am telling my story very badly,' said Tor. 'I forget how little you know. Phil has lately come into a large property. The great-uncle, out of whose way he was so carefully kept, ended by leaving all to him ; and, of course, he was written for urgently. He was hopelessly unconscious when the summons came, and the prevailing impression left on my mind

by the study of various letters was, that unless somebody with a head on his shoulders went over at once to see to things for him, the brute of an uncle I have mentioned before, would feather his nest well out of the property, which he would manage as next of kin, and would probably force Phil's sister into a marriage with his son, in order to secure her fortune to his family. Phil couldn't give me powers to act for him, and the scheme of personating him flashed into my head, and I acted upon it before I had really time to think the question seriously over. Besides, I thought then, that he would be sure to come to himself in a few weeks' time, to relieve me of the burden of his affairs ; and now it seems as though an indefinite time might pass before he recovers, and I'm getting precious tired of playing the part.'

'You are not acting from interested motives? You are dealing fairly by your friend?' questioned Miss Marjory, with some little sternness. 'Don't be offended at the question ; for, you know, you have placed yourself in a very awkward position.'

Tor admitted this readily and fervently; but a little more explanation convinced her that his

motive had been disinterested enough, and that he was guarding Phil's interests jealously. Miss Marjory was interested, and listened attentively whilst he enlarged upon his story, and gave fuller details of the situation.

Maud's position was explained, and Miss Marjory was quick enough to detect more in Tor's voice than in his words.

'I suppose you are in love with Phil's pretty sister yourself?' she said sharply. 'And are pretending to be her brother all the while, so that you cannot try your luck with her?'

Tor coloured through his bronze, but did not deny the soft impeachment.

'You have put yourself in a very awkward position,' repeated Miss Marjory. 'You will have to be very careful how you act.'

'I am very careful,' said Tor. 'I never lose sight of the fact that sooner or later the truth will be known. And when she looks back upon our intercourse, under the new light, I do not think she will have any cause to say that I have taken an unfair advantage of my position. I am as cautious and reserved as I can be, without exciting suspicion.'

'You are quite right, young man,' said Miss

Marjory, with emphasis. 'Always act like a man of honour, as your father did. You will never have cause to regret it if you do.'

'I hope I shall never be tempted to do otherwise,' said Tor, smiling; 'though I suppose, in the eyes of the law, I should be a felon now, if I were detected.'

'A felon!' echoed Miss Marjory.

'Why, yes. I sign Phil's cheques and securities. Is not that forgery?'

Miss Marjory's face grew grave.

'Is it really so serious as that?'

'It would be if I were detected before Phil can come forward to support me. Whilst he lies unconscious, I should be at the mercy of his kindred. Belassis, the unscrupulous uncle I have told you of, would be delighted to prosecute me.'

'What name did you say?' asked Miss Marjory quickly.

'Belassis—Alfred Belassis! That is Phil's uncle's name; and he hates and fears me more than a little. He would have no mercy.'

Miss Marjory made no further comment

upon the name just then, though a curious expression passed over her face. She was more interested in the other question under discussion.

'If they were to find you out, he would prosecute?'

'Certainly; and he could make good his case fast enough. I could not stand a "Claimant" cross-examination on places and events connected with Phil's boyhood; and one look at his unconscious face would stamp him as Maud's brother. My only chance lies in keeping off suspicion, until Phil comes to his senses. Then I am safe.'

'Belassis could not prosecute you then?'

'Not whilst Phil supported me; and said all was done according to his wish. *He* could prosecute me, but nobody else can.'

'You are sure of this?'

'Yes. I have studied the law of it.'

'And can you answer for your friend's acquiescence?'

Tor smiled.

'With my life.'

Miss Marjory pondered.

'You may find yourself in a very awkward fix one of these days, Mr. Torwood.'

'I am quite aware of it. Well as I have hitherto managed, and hopeful as I am of Phil's speedy recovery, I am still quite aware how insecure is the ground beneath my feet. You can judge, then, that your determined recognition of me as Torwood was a little disconcerting.'

Miss Marjory laughed at the recollection.

'You acted very well, you might have convinced most people; but I always did have my eyes in my head. But you may trust me; I will not betray you. You shall be Mr. Debenham here, and the true name shall never pass my lips, even when we are alone. You are your father's own son, and I will stand your friend. If ever you find yourself getting into trouble, write and tell me, and if I can I will help you. You have trusted me, and I will not desert you.'

'I am very grateful to you, Miss Marjory. I was afraid how my story might be taken. I am in a very anomalous position.'

'Pooh, nonsense! what does the position matter, so long as the conscience is clear? You have done a foolish, romantic, boyish thing, in a freak of fancy, without counting the cost; but I don't see that you have acted dishonourably in reality, only in outward show, and in a way that can easily be explained. So far as I can see, there is nothing to be regretted except the original decision, which, as you say, was made more in the spirit of jest than in earnest. It was a pity you ever began it—and yet I don't know. Poor Maud might have fallen into the clutches of Belassis——' and at the mention of that name Miss Marjory fell again into a reverie, from which she roused herself to conclude, 'Perhaps all will turn out for the best.'

'I hope so,' said Tor, who was rather more grave than usual, after putting into words, for the first time, the actual peril of his position. His secret, too, was not now entirely his own; and although he implicitly believed in Miss Marjory's goodwill and reticence, he could not but feel that a new complication had arisen, as well as a new danger, in his marked likeness

to his father, of which he had before been quite unconscious.

'Don't be down-hearted, Philip Debenham,' said Miss Marjory briskly. 'By far the worst of the danger is over. It isn't likely anything will turn up now to disturb you; but if it does, just you let me know. I think I might be able to help you if it came to a talk of prosecution.'

'I don't see how,' answered Tor, with a smile that thanked her for her goodwill.

Miss Marjory nodded her head and looked wise.

'Evidence of this interview would be of distinct value to you,' she remarked, 'and your accounts would go far to show that you have acted perfectly honestly, as trustee rather than as owner. If you told your story, and I corroborated it, and it was known that you had told it me, when detection was not even threatened, that would go far towards proving the innocence of your intentions. What view the law would take I cannot say; but I should be inclined to think it might be persuaded to suspend sentence, till your friend could come forward and speak for himself.'

'I do not know how that might be,' said Tor, 'but I see that your evidence might have weight. However, I trust the danger may never threaten.'

'So do I; but promise to write to me if it does.'

'I will do so gladly.'

'And let me know, too, if that marriage with Lewis Belassis—stay, perhaps I should not wait, only I do not yet know anything. It may be a mere coincidence.'

'I do not quite follow,' said Tor tentatively.

'No, of course not. How should you? I was chattering to myself. I'm not sure, though, but what I might be able to help you to put another spoke in Belassis' wheel.'

'You!' ejaculated Tor.

'Yes, I. But stop—I hear Horace coming in. We will talk more of this some other time. I must go out, but I think you had better not be seen in the streets of Whitbury, or somebody else might recognise Guy Torwood's son. Come, Horace, take Mr. Debenham into the garden to smoke whilst I go out.

Show him the hot-houses, or play a game of billiards. We dine at half-past seven, Mr. Debenham. I shall be in long before then.'

'She seems very much at home with this young Debenham,' thought Horace, as he carried Tor off to smoke.

END OF VOL. I.

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